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MEG LANGHOLME

OR

THE DAY AFTER TO-MORROW

Arthur still sat silent. I felt dreadfully sorry for him.

PAGE 23.

MEG LANGHOLME

OR

THE DAY AFTER TO-MORROW

BY

MRS MOLESWORTH, Mary Louisa (Stewart)

AUTHOR OF

'OLIVIA;' 'BLANCHE;' 'ROBIN REDBREAST;' 'CARROTS;' 'IMOGEN;' 'WHITE TURRETS;' 'PHILIPPA;' ETC.

WITH EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS

BY

W. RAINEY

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MEG LANGHOLME.

CHAPTER I.

POINTS IN THE PAST.

A LITTLE girl—a very little girl—was playing by herself in an old garden: an old garden, though not ancient enough to be quaint or picturesque, yet with a certain dignity and stateliness about it in spite of its comparatively small extent. It was before the days of 'bedding-out,' except in large show-places, so there were but few bright patches or streaks of colour to relieve the almost gloomy effect of the thick clumps of evergreen shrubs, and of the miniature copse of heavy trees which at two sides shut out the garden from the rest of the world.

And though still only early autumn, the summer feeling was to-day all gone—the sky was but grayly blue, the air already slightly chilly. The tiny, fair-

haired figure of the little maiden in white, with broad blue sash tied in orthodox short-waisted fashion, seemed little in keeping with its surroundings.

'Playing' I said she was, but it was scarcely the fact, though the materials for her play were lying about beside her—doll, tiny wheelbarrow and little spade, one or two picture-books, and a baby watering-can. But for the moment they were all neglected. The small face looked wistful and dispirited, as she stood gazing along a path leading to the house.

'I *wiss*—oh, I do wiss papa would tum out again!' she kept saying to herself. And as she repeated it for perhaps the twentieth time, her eyes brightened, a little flush of pleasure came into her cheeks; for a side-door of the house had opened, and a figure came out which at first, in the distance, for a moment she took for that of her father.

But no—'papa' it was not. It was much too small, and it *ran* in a very ungrown-up sort of way. It was a boy, not a man at all.

Little Meg had small experience of boys, and notwithstanding her disappointment, curiosity made itself felt. She stood gazing at the new-comer quite as intently as she had before been gazing at the empty path.

It took him but a very few moments to reach her. He was a slight but well-made boy of about twelve or thirteen; brown-haired, brown-eyed, brown—sun-browned rather—as to complexion. And his usual

expression was bright and cheery, though just now he was looking, feeling perhaps, a trifle shy. His experience of very small girls was not much greater than little Meg's of boys.

'Are you—yes, of course you are—you must be Miss Meg Langholme?' he said, with a smile.

The child looked up at him.

'No,' she said, 'I'm not that. I'm Meg, and I'm Miss Langholme; but I'm not Miss Meg Langholme.'

The boy laughed.

'I beg your pardon, Miss Langholme,' he said.

'No,' the small person replied, staring up at him gravely, as if taking stock of this outsider, in the way children do—'no, I *fink* you may say "Meg."'

'Thank you,' he replied.

'What's you come for? What's your name?' asked the little girl.

'My name's Arthur, and I've come out here to—to look after you while my father and yours are busy;' and he nodded his head backwards in the direction of the house.

'Has you got a papa too?'

'Yes. I told you so. I said "my father." Don't you remember?' said Arthur.

Meg did not reply. She sat—for by this time she had installed herself on a garden bench that stood handy, Arthur taking his place beside her—silent for a moment or two. Then she began again:

'What more has you?'

'I? Oh, I have a mother and a sister, and—sometimes a cousin,' he said.

'What's that?' asked Meg.

'What's what?' said Arthur.

'A—what you said—a cous——?'

'A cousin. Why, did you never hear of a cousin? Haven't you got any of your own?'

Meg shook her head.

'I don't know what it are.'

'Oh, well, a cousin's something like a brother; only they don't always live with you. They come sometimes.'

'Is they nice?' Meg cross-questioned.

'Oh yes, I suppose so, sometimes. You know what brothers are, don't you?' he replied, thinking he had got hold of a very odd little piece of humanity.

'Yes; I know about Cain and Abel and Jophiss and his bwethren, and "Hop-o'-my-fumb" and his sebben—no, six big bwothers,' said the child glibly. 'But they wasn't very nice, 'cept some of Jophiss's was. Is cousins like that?'

'I told you so; there's different kinds. And some are nice and some aren't. But never mind about brothers and cousins. I'll tell you about my sister Thea. She's *sweet*.'

'Are she? I'd like to see her,' replied Miss Langholme.

'Well, so you shall, whenever you like. That's to say, whenever your papa can bring you to our house,' said Arthur.

'I'm not children; I'm a little girl.'

PAGE 13.

'Where are your house?' asked the child.

'Don't you know? It's near here, where old Lady Featherstone used to live—Bray Weald, that long low red house a mile or two down the road. We've just come to live there.'

But a 'mile or two down the road' was almost too much for little Meg to take in; she shook her head.

'I don't know miles,' she said, 'but I'd like to see your sister. Will you ask papa to take me there some day?'

'Of course; you'll see my father directly, and he'll ask you. Mother would like you to come, and so would Thea. They love children.'

'I'm not children; I'm a little girl;' at which the boy could not help laughing. But he laughed so merrily, so kindly, that little Meg, after staring at him for a moment, laughed too, though at what she scarcely knew.

And then—memory lifts another fold of the curtain—two figures come slowly down the long path, and as they draw nearer, there sounds the well-known summons: 'Meg, Meggie, my little girl;' and with a cry of delight, the small person scrambles off her seat and runs to the outstretched arms.

'Papa, papa dear, I like that big boy,' she whispers confidentially. 'Will you take me to see his mamma and his sister?'

There was a smile in papa's kind eyes as he replied:

'You must ask this gentleman, little Meg. He is your boy's papa.'

Meg looked up in the face bent over her. The stranger was much older than her own father. To her he seemed very old indeed. In reality he was a man of about fifty, gray-haired and somewhat care-worn, but attractive, nevertheless, to his new little friend.

'I like you too,' she said frankly, as she held out her tiny hand.

And never in the years—few enough they were—that 'her boy's' father stayed among those that loved him did Meg waver in the least from this first childish instinct of trust and affection.

I may speak with authority and full knowledge, for little Meg was myself. And this autumn day in the old garden of my home was a date for ever in my life, the date of my first meeting with my Arthur—Arthur Gladwyn, my boy-friend; in the years to come my dearest and nearest.

Every one knows how certain events stand out distinct and isolated in a child's memory. Of the weeks and months, years even, that followed that day I have no very clear remembrance, with but two or three exceptions. I lived in the present, as a happy child should. A happy child I had always been; but from that time I grew still happier. For life became fuller to me. It was no longer *only* 'papa and I,' dearly as I continued to love him, for extended affection by no means need

be a shallower thing. Thanks to the friends at Bray Weald, I began thenceforth to know what family life really was; to slip into a place among them which seemed, as it were, to have been always waiting for me. I cannot now even picture to myself in the vaguest way what life would have been to me without them. For my father was a very busy man, and, as will no doubt have been already inferred, I was motherless, brotherless and sisterless too.

Yet there was no member of the Gladwyn family very near me in age. Arthur was the youngest, and he was nearly eight years my senior; and Thea—Althea Weybridge, his half-sister—was, again, six years older than he—nineteen or twenty—when her people first came to live in our neighbourhood. All the same I never felt, nor, I hope, seemed, in the way or out of my element at Bray Weald. Soon I had my own chair in the pretty drawing-room (you would scarcely call it pretty nowadays, perhaps—I am writing of fifty years ago—for it was somewhat stiff and formal compared with the crowded reception-rooms, littered with every costly and trivial novelty imaginable, which are in vogue); my own corner at the luncheon or tea table, sometimes even among the breakfast party; my little cot in Thea's room, when, on the rare occasions of my father's absence from home for several days together, Mrs Gladwyn carried me off to have me 'under her own eye.' I was, in short, in every sense the adopted child of these dear, kind friends. I cannot

picture what my life would have been without them, devoted to me though my father was, for he was not the sort of man to marry again; my mother had been too completely a part of himself for him ever to put another in her place. No, I can never be grateful enough for the happy chance that brought us such neighbours.

Looking back, onwards as it were, from that autumn afternoon, I see a long stretch of childhood, broken sometimes by special joys, happy birthdays, merry Christmases, seaside holidays, and the like; sometimes by sorrows and anxieties, though but vaguely understood.

Of these latter two stand out prominently — the sudden death of Arthur's father, 'Uncle Glad,' as I had learned to call him; and the long, at one time all but hopeless illness of sweet, pretty Thea. These two events happened about the same time; in my remembrance they seem confused and interwoven together, and, to a certain extent, this impression is a correct one. It was the shock of her father's fatal accident which brought to a crisis the suffering that the poor girl had for long been bravely enduring.

And this leads me to mention the 'cousin' whom Arthur described to me, the first time we met, as 'a sort of brother,' and concerning whom a slight indefinable misgiving existed in my mind from this first mention of him, owing doubtless to my boy-friend's dictum that cousins were sometimes nice and some-

times not, and my own reminiscences of 'brethren' as a very mixed lot indeed.

This cousin was one Roland Gladwyn, a fatherless young fellow, to whom was always extended the heartiest of welcomes at his relatives' home, though the cousinship was not of the closest. He was sure to be there at Christmas-time, and often for long visits at other seasons. He was eight or ten years older than Arthur; to me, therefore, he seemed a quite full-grown, even middle-aged man from the first. I liked him, and I didn't like him; but I never hated him, and children *can* hate. I think there was always in me a curious instinct of pity for Roland, which, mingled with his undoubted attractiveness, made me imagine, as I grew older and began to define my own sentiments, that I liked him more than I really did.

He was very handsome, and, strange to say, considering his whole character, not vain of his good looks, which in itself was an additional charm. He was poor, and made a joke of his poverty; he took most things lightly; and he was recklessly, impulsively good-natured. Yet Arthur and he were never really friends, though the fault lay scarcely on Roland's side. Possibly an unsuspected element of brotherly jealousy influenced Arthur to some slight extent, for Roland adored Thea, and it must have been easy to see that his devotion was returned. And all might have been, and should have been, well had *something*, some element of true manliness and trustworthiness, not

been wanting altogether in the young man, as Roland then was.

They were not formally engaged. What Roland was waiting for I scarcely know, for under the circumstances, as Arthur has often since assured me, a long engagement would not have been objected to. *Perhaps* Roland was diffident as to his own chances of acceptance; more probably his light, pleasure-loving nature dreaded the deprivations and restrictions of married life on small means, as Thea was no heiress. But though nominally free, the girl's whole heart was given to him, when the crash came.

I will relate all I personally can recall.

It was when I was about fourteen—Thea must have been fully twenty-eight—that one day, as we were idling over the luncheon-table—I was spending the afternoon at Bray Weald—there came the sound of carriage-wheels driving up rapidly to the door.

'Who can it be?' said Arthur, and he sprang up and went to the window, whence, by dint of a little dexterity, he could see the front of the house. 'Not Roland, surely; he said he could not possibly get away from his office this week.'

But the suggestion had already brought a rush of colour to Thea's cheek, though she tried to seem as if she were scarcely paying attention to what was passing.

An exclamation from Arthur, however, made every one start.

'By Jove,' he said, 'it's—it's Uncle Peter!'

Uncle Glad looked up anxiously.

'Uncle Peter,' he repeated. 'Run to meet him, Arthur. Bring him in if he will come.'

He himself half rose, though slowly, from his place. I think I have forgotten to say that Uncle Glad was a little lame. Arthur was off in a moment, and in another moment or two back again. He shook his head.

'He would rather go straight to your study at once, father,' he said. 'He had something to eat on the journey, and he is very anxious to see you.'

Luncheon was really over. Uncle Glad felt for his stick, always leaning on the side of his chair, and turned to leave the room. Auntie, as I called her, beckoned to Arthur.

'What is it?' she said, 'Anything wrong?'

'I don't quite know,' he replied in the same low tone in which his mother had spoken. 'I'm afraid it must be; the old man looks very worried.'

'But after all,' said auntie, as she glanced round, 'it can't be anything *very* bad as long as we are all here together and well, for Uncle Peter has no other relations he cares for, except'—— The words died on her lips as the exception—'Roland'—came into her mind, and at the same instant her eyes caught sight of Thea, white as death and trembling violently.

'Oh mamma!' said the poor girl. 'Arthur, do go.'

I felt frightened and miserable without knowing why. Auntie told me all about it long afterwards, when I was older and could understand better. I ran round to Thea and clasped her in my arms, but she scarcely seemed to see me; and auntie—Arthur had already gone—whispered gently:

'Run away, darling. Get your hat and run out into the garden. Poor Thea is frightened and upset. I will send out for you soon.'

I think I must have been an obedient child. I knew that, kind as he was, once papa said a thing, he would have it done, and such knowledge is excellent training; so I did at once what Mrs Gladwyn told me. But oh! her 'soon' seemed a very long time of coming—never did an afternoon drag on such slow wings; two or three times I thought I really could not stand it any longer. At last I heard the sound of wheels coming round from the stable-yard, and the old fly from Bray, which I knew well by sight, appeared on its way to the hall door.

I had not been told not to look, so I stood in the shade of a clump of bushes on the lawn and stared with all my eyes.

A curious, old-fashioned-looking figure came out into the porch, followed by Uncle Glad and Arthur, to whom he was still talking earnestly. I knew it must be old Mr Peter Gladwyn, though I had never seen him before. Even then he seemed to be very old; he must have been past seventy, though he

lived several more years. He was small and shrunken; his clothes were of a long-past fashion; he had a bright brown wig and spectacles. But I had a sort of feeling that he must be nice, even though I could not see him plainly. His figure was neat and alert, and he shook hands most cordially with his nephew and great-nephew. He was Uncle Glad's uncle, you see—not Arthur's. I could scarcely distinguish what was said, and I had a feeling that it would not have been right for me to hear it, had it been possible. I only caught the words from Uncle Glad, 'Thank you, thank you for coming yourself to tell us,' and something like, 'Good-bye, good-bye; all right in time,' from the funny little old gentleman, and then the rickety fly made its clumsy way down the drive. Five minutes later I heard myself called:

'Meg, Meg, where have you hidden yourself?'

It was Arthur's voice. I ran towards him.

'Oh Arthur!' I exclaimed, 'I am so tired. What *is* the matter? What did that funny old man come here for? I've been waiting out here all the afternoon;' and indeed I was nearly in tears.

Arthur took my hand and led me to a little arbour near where we were standing. He looked pale and sad.

'Meggy dear,' he said, 'I can't explain it all to you, and it would do no good. But I will tell you part. We have had a great shock, not exactly a sorrow—not, at least, to me or—or my parents them-

selves, except for'—— and here he broke off and stopped short. 'It is just this,' he began again; 'Roland—Roland Gladwyn—has not behaved well, not like a true and honourable man—and he can never come here again.'

'I don't much care,' I said, rather surprised that such tidings should have caused so much distress. 'Do *you*?'

Arthur hesitated.

'N-no,' he said; 'I have never taken much to Roland. I have often blamed myself for not being more cordial to him, when he has always seemed so pleasant and affectionate to me. But now'—and he ground his teeth—'Heaven be thanked I *was* prejudiced,' he muttered. 'No, Meg, it is not for myself, but—can't you understand? He has made somebody else care for him with all the depth of her sweet, good heart, and now—now it all falls on *her*. She can never see him again, and, worst of all, she has to give him up even in her thoughts as ever having been worthy of her trust and love. It must be much, much worse for her than if he had died.'

And then, to a certain extent, though but a little girl, I *did* understand. And I felt myself grow cold and choking with the first realisation, slight as it was, that had ever come into my life, of deep, terrible suffering. I just whispered:

'Thea—you mean Thea?'

'Yes, dear,' said Arthur quietly enough, though his voice sounded strange; 'yes, dear, I mean Thea.'

I slipped my hand into his without speaking. I did not dream of asking any questions bearing directly on this miserable news, whatever it was, though I could not help wondering to myself what it was that Roland had done. I did not know the full details of it for years; indeed, *quite* the whole, how he could have been so foolish, so entirely blind to his own interests, I do not think any one connected with him ever *did* quite know. Probably enough his ill-balanced, inconsistent mind could scarcely have explained it to himself!

Arthur still sat silent. I felt dreadfully sorry for him; all the bright boyishness seemed for the time to have gone out of his face. I tried to think of something to say to divert his thoughts a little, which yet should not make me appear careless or forgetful already of the mysterious blow which had fallen on my dear friends. And at last I spoke again:

'Is that old gentleman—your Uncle Peter, Arthur—is he nice?'

Arthur smiled a little, a very little.

'Yes,' he replied, 'he's not a bad old fellow. He's comical-looking; I wish you had seen him.'

'I did see him,' I said. 'I was over there on the lawn—beside the rhododendrons—just now, when he came out with you and Uncle Glad and drove away. I thought he looked rather like a kind of fairy godfather. Is he very rich?'

'Dear, no,' said Arthur; 'poor old chap, I dare say

it 's all he can do to make both ends meet sometimes. Yet he 's generous—he 's given me some jolly good presents in his time, and to Thea too. And he 's been uncommonly kind to—to *him*, you know '—and I understood that Roland was not to be named—' even though he is not a very near relation, only a cousin's son, not a nephew.'

I felt a little puzzled.

' What relation is Thea, then, to old Uncle Peter ? ' I asked.

' None—none at all. He 's my father's side, of course —Gladwyn, the same name. But he has known mother's family for long, and he 's awfully fond of Thea. It—it wasn't for that fellow's sake he took the trouble of coming himself to-day—it was to save *us* hearing of it in some more painful way. He—he suspected what it would be to Thea. I never knew till to-day how glad he would have been if she *had* become a Gladwyn ; he thinks a lot of his family, and he has more affection for *him* than he deserves. He said such a marriage would have been the " making " of Rol '—the name began to slip out involuntarily— ' and so it would. Perhaps, after all, there was more good in him than I can allow, at present, any way.'

The talk was veering round again to the sore subject. I felt it was better not.

' Arthur,' I said, getting up from my seat, ' I think perhaps I 'd better go home.'

CHAPTER II.

THEA.

ARTHUR looked at me, a fresh shade of trouble coming over his face.

'Everything's spoilt,' he murmured, almost petulantly. 'You were to have stayed here over to-morrow, weren't you, Meggy?'

'No,' I said. 'I was going home after dinner this evening. Papa is coming back to-night. I think I'd rather go now. Auntie will be with Thea—and—and it would be better altogether for me to go, don't you think?'

'Well, yes, perhaps,' he agreed. 'I'll go in and see mother if I can; and then I'll walk across the fields with you; and your things?'——

'I haven't any things,' I interrupted. 'You forget—I only came to spend the day; and I've got all my French exercises to copy out—to-morrow is Mademoiselle Fripet's day, so perhaps it's a good thing for me to go home early.

I tried to speak bravely, but in reality it was all

I could do not to cry. I had so looked forward to to-day, as we had planned some special treat—tea in the woods, I think it was to be. Arthur said nothing, but I am sure he 'understood.' He always did understand.

'My hat 's in the garden-room,' I said. 'I 'll run in and get it, and my gloves—that 's all I have;' for it was full summer-time; 'and then I 'll come back here and wait for you.'

'I won't keep you, dear,' said Arthur.

Nor did he—he was back at the arbour before me. We did not sit down again, but started at once. We spoke little—not at all, indeed, till we had crossed a field or two and were in the lane, at the end of which another path over the meadows brought us to the side entrance of my own home. Then he turned abruptly, seeming to come out of his brown study all at once.

'Oh,' he said, 'mother sent you her love—"love to darling Meg," she said, "and she will write to you, or come to see you as soon as ever she can; and you are not to be unhappy—about us all."'

The tears had crept up to my eyes at the loving little message. I could fancy I heard dear auntie saying it.

'Arthur,' I began, after again a little silence, 'may I tell papa all—all that happened to-day—all that I know, I mean?'

'Yes, of course you may. But you couldn't tell him

what you *don't* know. You are getting Irish, Meggy,' he replied, trying to joke a little.

'Yes, I could,' I maintained; 'I could say I thought this or fancied that, and—oh! you know how one can talk. Or shall I just tell him there was something I wasn't told about, and that he 'd better not ask any of you about?'

'My darling child,' said Arthur, 'say anything you like to your father. If there is any one in the world whose sympathy we could stand just now, it would be Mr Langholme. I 'm sure my poor father will be eager to see him. Only, try to put our troubles out of your head, dear, as much as you can. Come now, shall I race you across the Long Meadow? I 'll give you'—— And then he began to calculate the number of yards' start I should have; and, to please him, I did my best to fall in with his wishes.

Papa came home a little earlier than I expected. I remember everything that happened that day so well. I was so glad to see him; and his pleased surprise at finding me already there took off the edge of my personal disappointment. He soon saw that I had something on my mind, and I told him what it was. He listened very gravely, evidently reading between the lines of my imperfect account.

'Poor Thea,' he said; 'perhaps—who knows?—bitter as it may be just now—all the more so because it cannot be acknowledged openly as a

trial—yet perhaps it has saved her from worse in the future. A weak character, such as I have always suspected Roland Gladwyn's to be, more or less, sometimes seems to cause greater misery than a really worse man does;' and then he sat in silence for a few moments, idly balancing the paper-knife he had taken up to cut the newspaper waiting for him.

We dined together, he and I. There was no very hard-and-fast rule about my dinner. Indeed, I fear I was not brought up at all in orthodox fashion. And though I was, of course, feeling sad about the troubles at Bray Weald, still I was very young, and, like Arthur, I had never 'taken' much to Mr Roland Gladwyn.

'I just wish they'd forget all about him,' I thought; 'and I'm sure I don't want dear Thea to marry *anybody*. It would be awfully dull without her.'

As we were sitting over dessert — the sun was nearing his setting, but it was still quite light, for it was only August, and people dined earlier in those days—I caught sight of a familiar figure crossing the lawn. It was Arthur again. My father rose to meet him. He peeped in at the window, for he had come round by the back of the house without going to the hall door.

'Come in—come in,' said my father heartily; and Arthur—how nice he looked in evening-dress, with just a light overcoat thrown on loosely; slight and

boyish-looking, though two-and-twenty—pushing open the unlatched glass door a little more widely, stepped in and glanced round inquiringly.

'I really should not come stealing in like this, sir,' he said, his colour rising a little. He was not fair, but he was young enough to blush quickly still. 'It was only'——

'Delighted to see you, my dear boy,' papa interrupted, 'as you know I always am.'

'Thank you—thank you very much. It was my mother who sent me. She wasn't very happy about Meg — poor little Meggy, she said, whom we had treated so cavalierly this afternoon. And Thea, too—she begged me to give you her special love, Meg dear. We were afraid you might be dull if Mr Langholme hadn't come home, and you were spending a lonely evening.'

I was standing by papa, I remember. His arm was thrown round me. A ray of the rosy sunset had fallen on my fair hair and white frock. Arthur has told me since—for he has never forgotten that day—that we made a pretty picture together, papa and I.

'I am very pleased to see you, all the same, though your visit was meant for Meg,' said papa. 'And how are you all at Bray Weald? I'——

'You have heard of our strange visitor?' said Arthur quickly.

Papa nodded his head. 'Yes,' he said gravely.

'Meg has told me. How is your mother, and——?' He hesitated.

'They are all right, or they would say they were. They are as good as—*too* good,' said Arthur, almost impatiently. 'It makes *me* all the "badder,"' with an attempt at a laugh. 'Old Uncle Peter *is* a character,' he went on. 'Did you ever meet him by any chance, Mr Langholme?'

'Yes; some years ago he used to turn up at my club now and then,' papa replied. 'I liked him—there is something very genuine about him, though one can see he is eccentric. Is there not some story about him, something to account for his curiously isolated life, his misanthropy, if that is not too harsh a word to use?'

'It is strange that you should allude to that,' said Arthur, his face lighting up with interest. 'There *is* a story. I never heard it till to-day, till this evening, in fact, when my father spoke of it, as—as explaining partly the hot way he had taken up this unfortunate affair of Roland's. I don't know the full details, nor does any one now, probably, except old Peter himself. He was in love once, ages ago, of course, when he was quite young, and something came in the way—his pride, I fancy. The girl was an heiress, and he wouldn't ask her to marry him till he had gained a certain position, or a certain sum of money perhaps, which I suppose he never did, for he doesn't seem to have more than a mere pittance even now. So he

put off and put off, and something dreadful happened. Father couldn't remember if she was burnt to death, or got smallpox, or fever of some kind. Any way, she died without ever having the happiness of knowing that he cared for her. And if they had been married she would have escaped the thing, whatever it was, that killed her; or, at least, he has always believed this. Of course, his motive was, in a way, a good one: misplaced feeling of honour—a very different case from'——

He stopped. Papa looked up.

'I know no particulars,' he said. 'Meg'——

'I've not finished my French yet,' I said, for I saw that Arthur would probably tell papa more than he thought me old enough to understand; and when I noticed—now that the little flush had faded—that the dear boy's face was pale and tired-looking, I felt glad for him to have the comfort of a good talk.

Arthur touched me gently with his hand as I passed, for by this time we were again seated at the table.

'Thoughtful little Meg,' he whispered, and I felt rewarded for the small self-denial.

I did not see him again that evening. Papa and he sat talking till it was quite late; and when I woke up from my first doze my dear father was listening at the half-open door of my room to hear by my breathing if I were asleep.

'I'm awake, daddy dear,' I said drowsily.

'Good-night, my pet—good-night, my Meggie,' he said, stooping over me tenderly. 'And may my darling never love one unworthy of her,' he whispered.

I don't think he meant me to hear it, but I did, and I never forgot the words.

I have related all the events of that day as circumstantially as possible, because, in more ways than one, it marked a crisis in my life. I do not think that I was ever again the thoughtless child I had been—if, indeed, children are as thoughtless as they are often called, which I have my own opinion about. Is it not rather that they *think* in a different way? Be that as it may, from that time I changed. I had come into real contact with trouble, and perhaps it impressed me the more lastingly because its exact nature and cause remained for long a sort of mystery to me. It was not till years afterwards that I knew the whole story which old Mr Peter Gladwyn had come to tell—that by a curious chain of circumstances it had come to his ears, and he had proved it to be true, that Roland, his cousin's son, was married, and that quite recently, to a young woman beneath him in every way. How it had come to pass, as I said before, that one so selfish and ease-loving had done what in one aspect might seem self-forgetting, and even chivalrous, no one ever thoroughly understood. The girl herself had not been so much to blame as is often the case in such unhappy *mésalliances*. And her people, though of quite a different class to

her husband's, were respectable. It was Roland's own fault. He had played with edged tools. While really devoted to Althea Weybridge, he had amused himself with this girl, risking miserable suffering on one side or the other. There had been a stormy scene between him and his old relation, especially when Uncle Peter (as for long I have learned to call him) discovered that Roland had no immediate intention of confessing the truth to the family at Bray Weald.

'Then *I* shall tell them,' said Uncle Peter; and so he did, and that without loss of time, though a sudden and, in those days, somewhat long journey was no trifling inconvenience to the old man, who for years past had never slept out of his own house. And, cordial as his feelings were to his relations at Bray Weald, nothing would persuade him to stay there once his painful mission was accomplished. He drove back to the 'King's Head' at Bray, where he spent the night, and set off again the next morning in the stage-coach to the nearest station on the railway to London, whence he made his way home into Devonshire.

These details are a parenthesis. But the whole story leads up to the events which I began by mentioning as the two great sorrows of my young days, and these I must now speak of.

Poor old Uncle Peter! He meant well, and he did well; but his visit that August day certainly seemed the precursor of troubles.

I got a note from Auntie Glad the next day but one,

asking me to go over in the afternoon, and to stay to dinner if papa could spare me, or would perhaps accompany me. The latter he could not do.

'I have to go to a meeting at Bray,' he said; 'county business, which may detain me. But I would like you to go, Meg dear, and I will drive round that way—I must dine at the "King's Head"—and pick you up in the course of the evening.'

So I walked over with my maid. We did not take the short-cut, as I had done with Arthur, for there was an old woman at the Four Cottages, as we called a little group of houses on the road half-way between our gates and the Weald, whom I made a practice of going to see once a week, and this was her day. She was a nice old woman, sensible and intelligent, though she could neither read nor write, and I liked talking to her. She used to tell me about papa when he was a boy, and about how pretty mamma was, and how bright and merry, and how everybody liked her, though she had barely been two years at Holme Alders when she died. And, farther back than that, old 'Tilda, as she was often called—her real name was Matilda Drew—could remember my grandparents, and even the generation before them, for we Langholmes have lived a long, long time at Holme Alders; and though we have never been among the *most* important or wealthy of the county people, I, for my part, independently of my having been in a modest way an heiress, have

never wished for any—in a worldly sense—'better' or more prominent social position.

'Tilda was pleased to see me, as she always was, but I fancied she seemed a little worried.

'Is there anything the matter?' I asked her.

She shook her head.

'Not for to say "the matter," missie dear,' she replied, 'but times is changing, and I 'm getting old, and I don't like it. Folks is not content as they used to be, and there 's a deal of wild talk of rights and wrongs as didn't used to be, and as won't do no good.'

'But how do you hear it?' I asked, with some vague idea of the sort of thing she meant. 'I dare say they talk a lot of nonsense at the "Green Oak," especially when they 've had a good many mugs of beer; but that needn't worry *you*.'

'It 's the new fam'ly at the double cottage,' said Mrs Drew. 'You know Herds has left—gone for good to live with the married daughter; and they were a decent couple, and old friends and neighbours. And I misses them; I won't go for to say I don't. And the new folks is not like the old ones.'

'But they must be respectable people,' I said. 'Papa is always very careful whom he lets our cottages to—especially these ones. He always counts them the best we have, almost.'

'Oh yes, missie; they 're 'spectable enough. Blunt is their name. There 's a father—no mother—who 's

quite old and feeble, and two sons and two daughters, and another young man, a cousin, who 's been to Ameriky, and talks of going back there, and I wish he 'd go. It 's mostly along of him; he 's full of talk about a free country, where each has a ekill chance to come to the top—no game laws, or kings and queens, or parliaments. Let me see—I 'm not sure about parliaments, and there must be *some* laws over there—sure-ly ? '

'Of course there are—just as strict as here,' I said. 'And as for a free country—why, 'Tilda—why, in America they have *slaves !* '

Mrs Drew's eyes twinkled.

'Have they really, missie ? Who 'd a thought it ? Well, to be sure; I 'll come out with that to Jeremy Blunt, I will.'

'And if he 's an idle, chattering sort of fellow, as he seems to be, I dare say they don't want him over there any more than we do here,' I said indignantly. 'There must be plenty of good, sensible people there too, I am sure.'

'Well, Miss Langholme, I did say to him, if he was so much made of there, and such a chance to get on, what for didn't he stay ? '

'And what did he answer ? '

'I couldn't rightly say—a deal o' talk, missie; business to see to; I don't know all what. It 's my belief he 's up to no good, and he 'll teach those Blunt boys no good neyther. There 's the younger of them now,

already—Phil they call him—he's full of it all; he don't see why he should have to work and others be idle, he'll say. And he might be a nice fellow; a big, fine-made young man he do be.'

'What a pity!' I said. 'I'll talk to papa about them, and perhaps he could get that Jeremy sent away.'

'But you'll not say as it was me, missie dear?' said poor Matilda. 'They'd not take it neighbourly, you see.'

'Oh no; you may trust me. I'll be very careful,' I said.

And then I bade her good-bye, and told her to cheer up; she needn't listen to all that wild talk if it worried her. But I could not help thinking, as I pursued my way to the Weald, how much easier it seems to be to sow bad seed than good; at least, how much more certain it appears that the former will bear fruit than the latter. Perhaps it is not really so; perhaps it is our short-sighted eyes that are too dull to discern the delicate little white blossoms of goodness, while the flaunting evil weeds are all conspicuous. As I grow old I begin to think this more and more; it takes pure eyes to see the divine.

'But,' I then thought to myself, for I *was* a thoughtful child, 'supposing that Jeremy Blunt had been a sort of saint, would the men at the "Green Oak" and that cousin of his have been carried away by his talk of true and good things, as old 'Tilda says they are

by all the wild and foolish things he *is* teaching them? I must tell papa about him.'

That was the first time I had ever heard of Phil Blunt. I little thought that he would ever in any way be mixed up with the strange events of my life.

I found Thea watching for me. I felt by instinct that she wanted to seem, and wanted me to think her the same, or as nearly as possible the same, as usual. And at first it struck me that she was looking particularly well and prettier than ever; for, as a rule, she was rather too pale, and her dark hair clustering round her face increased its delicate, almost fragile appearance. And to-day she had quite a bright colour in her cheeks, and she smiled as she stooped to kiss me. Thea was tall, but I was not so tall and well-developed as the nowadays girl.

'Darling Meggie,' she said, 'I'm so glad you have come early. And you are going to stay to dinner?'

'Yes, thank you, dear Thea,' I replied; and I explained papa's plan of coming to fetch me on his way home.

'So Wellman need not wait,' I said, turning to my maid. 'Just leave my cloak in the hall, please, and then you can go and see your aunt for a minute before you go home;' for Wellman's aunt was cook at the Weald. They belonged to the family of a small farmer who was one of my father's tenants, and were thoroughly and completely trustworthy. Indeed, Wellman is with me still, though her aunt has long been dead.

'I came round by old 'Tilda Drew's,' I went on to Thea, feeling glad to catch at any subject of conversation which would keep us off painful allusions, though in this I somewhat failed after all. 'She is rather worried by some new neighbours at the Four Cottages;' and I went on to tell her what I had heard.

Thea looked thoughtful.

'I know that sort of talk,' she said; 'it is very specious; the more so that there *is* more than one side to these great social questions. I often ask my father about them; you know how wise he is, and how truly philanthropic. He says this century will see great changes.'

'You don't mean that there'll be a French revolution in England, Thea?' I interrupted, struck by her tone. 'We *aren't* like the old French *noblesse*, who treated the poor people like dogs;' for I was in the thick of the history of the Terror time, and full of the fascination of it.

'Worse than dogs in some cases, I'm afraid,' said Althea; 'but, on the other hand, there were a great many more good people—just and benevolent, because truly religious—than one is apt to think. Father says in process of time, when things are judged more impartially and fairly, as they always come to be when seen from a greater distance, there will be a kind of reaction in history in favour of the many good, who, just *because* they were good, it seems to me, have escaped notice.'

'But still,' I objected, 'still, Thea, there must have been a great deal very wrong. Of course you can't help feeling for the upper classes; they were so brave, so grand in some ways, but they *were* horrid to the poor.'

'Many were, but many were not,' said Thea. 'Times and ideas change, of course, and improve, we must hope; but, according to their lights, the old county families were very kind to their dependents in many cases, there can be no doubt. Father says a great deal must be put down to real ignorance. Even here in England we are only now beginning to wake up to many things which are terribly wrong—the wretched houses of the poor, for one thing, both in towns and in the country.'

What she said interested me; but, after all, I was only a child. My personal regard for old 'Tilda appealed to me more closely.

'But you can't mean that that horrid man from America is right to talk that way,' I said, half impatiently, and rather inconsequently, seeing that my sympathy had hitherto been expressed on the side of the lower classes.

Thea smiled again.

'Of course not, even though there may be a grain of truth beneath all that clap-trap; he must be a very mischievous, unprincipled fellow. But I care much more for the boy, Phil Blunt. Arthur knows him a little—I think he is in the cricket club—a fine-looking young fellow, but of weak character, easily led away;'

and Thea sighed. 'Oh Meg, darling!' she went on, 'there is nothing *so* miserable as *want* of character. We must hope weakness and instability are not judged like deliberate, calculating badness, but in *this* world I do believe they cause more ruin and wretchedness.'

I pressed her arm, but did not speak, though I understood a good deal. That was always *her* view of Roland; she kept to it loyally. He had not 'meant' to break her heart, as, in truth, he had gone very near to doing.

'I will speak to Arthur about that foolish boy,' she added after a moment or two's silence.

Then we turned to go in. The colour had already died out of Thea's cheeks, and she seemed tired.

'I will go in and lie down a little,' she said. 'I promised mamma I would, for I had a bad night.'

'May I stay beside you?' I asked eagerly. 'If I were to read aloud, perhaps you would go to sleep, and then you would feel fresher at dinner-time, and they would all be pleased.'

'You are very modest about your own power of entertaining, if you only recommend your reading as likely to send me to sleep,' said Thea, laughingly.

But I carried my way. I *did* read to her, and she *did* fall asleep. I doubt if she had slept at all the night before, or, if she had, whether it had done her any good, poor dear. The first sleeping after any great shock or blow is always so horrible! I sat close

beside her, and she caught sight of me, and smiled up at me the moment she awoke.

And as the Gladwyns were all the most unselfish people in the world, each exerting himself or herself for the sake of the others, that evening does not stand out in my memory as in any way painful or depressing.

CHAPTER III.

A DRIVE IN THE TWILIGHT.

PAPA came to fetch me, as he had promised. We were all sitting together in the veranda—there used to be a charming veranda at the Weald; it is all pulled down now, and the house so altered that no one would know it—after dinner, when he drove in, and he jumped down and sent the dog-cart into the stable-yard for a few minutes.

'Don't put up,' he called out; then turning to me as soon as he had shaken hands with them all, 'Meggy dear,' he said, 'I'm afraid I must hurry you away. I have letters I must write to-night—some business I had not time to see to before I went to Bray this afternoon.'

'Always busy,' said Mr Gladwyn, with a smile. 'Not like me; I am growing very useless, I fear, Langholme—old and lazy.'

'Nonsense,' said papa; 'you are just as busy, and, I have no doubt, a very great deal more useful, really,

than I, though yours is the kind of work that takes time to show.'

There was no flattery in this. Mr Gladwyn was a scholar, a very learned man, though it was not for some considerable time after his death that the value of a great part of his work came to be fully understood and appreciated; whereas my father, who had been a soldier till he married, was thoroughly 'practical'—eager for work, and seldom content to be inactive, scarcely even to take needful rest. Since he had come to settle down at his own place, he had developed into an excellent landlord, seeing to everything for himself. And as Holme Alders was, comparatively speaking, a small property, and scarcely gave scope for all his energy, he was always full of county business in addition to his own affairs. It is the willing horse that does the most and gets the most to do. Whenever anything needed to be seen to in the neighbourhood, it was always to Mr Langholme that application was made.

We were soon on our way home, I perched up beside my father on his high cart—a position that I loved. I think he had perhaps a little exaggerated the business still before him that evening, as he was almost nervously afraid of seeming to intrude on our friends just now. In such cases a slight feeling of constraint is almost unavoidable, for they knew that he was aware of this sudden shock.

'Did you notice Thea, papa?' I inquired. 'I don't

think she is looking much unlike her usual. Perhaps'—I hesitated—'perhaps she won't mind much after a little.'

Papa shook his head.

'I wish I could think so,' he said. 'No; I thought she looked very ill, or rather *different*. I fear she is one of those with whom things go very deep;' and he sighed.

I was disappointed. I was young enough to feel almost 'irritated' at the idea of lasting sorrow, and, personally, I had never cared much for Roland Gladwyn. I did not see that it need be very difficult for Thea just to put the thought of him altogether away for ever. There were far nicer people in the world than he, and she had her own dear home and *mother*, which last possession I had often envied her! And life might still be very bright for her. 'There are so many nice, happy things in the world; I don't see why any one need be always miserable,' I thought.

'She was speaking quite brightly to me,' I said; 'at least just as usual, or even more brightly. She was talking of very interesting things—the French Revolution and—oh! that reminds me,' and I interrupted myself, 'I want to talk to you about'——

But here papa interrupted me.

'What did distress me almost more than to see poor Thea's changed looks,' he said, 'was Mr Gladwyn. He seems to be so aged and feeble. I have feared it for some time, but I hoped it was just his chronic

rheumatism. But now—this has been a blow to him, and it may have found him but ill prepared to meet it.'

He seemed almost to be more thinking aloud than speaking to me. For my father was wholesomely afraid of making me into an old woman before my time, and never talked much to me on troublous subjects.

'But after all, papa,' I said, influenced, I fear, by a touch of contradiction, 'Thea isn't Uncle Glad's *own* daughter, and'——

Papa turned on me almost sharply.

'My dearest child, that is not the sort of remark I expect from *you*,' he said. 'Thea could not be dearer to her step-father than she is—for her own sake and her mother's. Besides—well, perhaps I am forgetting that you are only a little girl—but don't you see, dear, that the fact of one on his side, of his own blood, having turned out such a bitter disappointment, makes it doubly hard to a sensitive, almost over-conscientious, man like Gladwyn? He will be blaming himself now, no doubt, for having thrown them so much together, and all that kind of thing.'

I did not reply. I was feeling, to tell the truth, a little bit 'snubbed,' and that is a sensation I have never taken kindly to. I am afraid papa detected a touch of sulky expression on my face, for I was conscious that he glanced at me, and then rather quickly turned the conversation.

'What was it that you said you wanted to ask me about, Meggy?' he said. 'I fear I interrupted you'—papa was always as polite to me as if I were a grown-up lady—'something about the French Revolution, didn't you say?'

'No, no,' I replied, trying to master my silly temper; 'it was something that led round to our talking about the French Revolution. It was about the new people at the Four Cottages, papa—the people who have come to live in the double one. Their name is Blunt.'

Papa nodded his head. Of course he knew all his tenants by name.

'Did you know, papa, that they are not very nice people?—at least some of them aren't;' and I proceeded to tell him what I had heard from old Dame Drew.

Papa listened, a shade of annoyance creeping over his face.

'Of course I knew all about the Blunt family themselves,' he replied; 'I mean the old man and his children, and I had a special reason for letting them have that good cottage when I heard they were leaving Wearsley'—a village ten or twelve miles off—'and wanted to come back to Alders.'

'Back,' I repeated; 'then did they ever live here before? Tilda didn't say so.'

'Possibly she never saw them; it may have been at the time her husband was gardener at Felling Court, in the next county. Oh yes, old Blunt was one of

your grandfather's keepers long ago—a very good sort of man, but cursed with a disreputable, ne'er-do-weel of a brother. By-the-bye, he must have been this very desirable Master Jeremy's father. Our young friend had better be cautious as to how he boasts and brags. He would not like to be twitted with being the son of a convict. Really—no, I had no idea there was one of that lot still about; and I do not believe poor old Blunt knew it either when he applied for the cottage. It seems as if it was in the blood—poor old Mat Blunt—surely he has had trouble enough, and now for it to begin again!'

I was much interested; papa did not often tell me so much about such matters.

'And the worst of it is about his own son, papa—that Philip, whom Arthur knows. If he gets him into bad ways'——

'We must see to it. I am glad to have heard about it—in time, I hope,' said papa.

I was thinking over what he had said.

'I would like to know'—— I began. 'Papa, do you mind telling me what old Blunt's brother did, that he was made a convict? And has that anything to do with your wanting to be kind to him now?' For I had all a child's curiosity.

Papa hesitated.

'No,' he said, 'I do not mind telling you; but you must never speak of it, Meg; not even to old 'Tilda Drew.'

'Of course not,' I replied. 'I won't even tell Thea or Arthur, if you would rather I didn't.'

'The less said about past stories of the kind the better,' said papa; 'though I dare say I may tell it to Arthur myself, as I shall be glad of his help with the boy Philip. It was just this, Meg; old Blunt saved my life once, long ago, when I was at home one winter on leave. The brother I told you of got among a poaching lot, and one night when I was out with Blunt there was a fight, or almost a fight. Tom Blunt fired, and I should certainly have been hit, and probably killed, if the keeper had not thrown himself in the way. *He* was hit, and badly; he has never been the same man since. But the story was hushed up and made out to have been an accident, and Tom Blunt was got off to America or somewhere. My father even never knew the rights of it, and I gave in as to the part that might have come out badly for Tom Blunt. I hope I did right. I have sometimes had misgivings about it;' and papa sighed again. 'It might have been better in the end for the fellow to have had his lawful deserts; he *did* mean to injure if not to kill me, for he knew that I had been trying to make his brother throw him off for good and all. But I could not stand out against poor old Mathew; that is the old father now, you understand, Meg. He begged me so to give Tom another chance, and as he, Mathew himself, had been the sufferer, I could not refuse.'

'No,' I said, 'I really don't see that you *could*, papa. And so he—that horrid Tom—is Jeremy's father?'

'Yes; he turned up again years after, in a different part of the country, somewhat improved, Mathew thought. He married; his wife was better than he deserved, I fancy. Then, some years later, she died, and he went off again to America. I remember hearing he had one son whom Mathew wanted to bring up for him, but he took the boy with him. That must be this Jeremy. I have never lost sight of Mathew; I could not have done so, out of common gratitude, and I was glad to have this cottage vacant for him when I found he had to leave Wearsley, and had a wish to die in the old place, as he said.'

'*What* a pity that Jeremy has come back!' I said. 'Perhaps Phil would have been quite good and sensible but for him.'

'I don't know,' said papa. 'There must be a queer, reckless strain in the family, for so many of them to have this curious antipathy to law and order. But talk of—we can scarcely call Phil an "angel," Meg, and I must not shock your ears by the other version of the proverb—there he is, do you see?—that tall, black-browed young fellow, leaning against the gate. That is Phil Blunt.'

'Oh, do stop and speak to him!' I said. 'I do want to see what he's like. *Perhaps*, papa, he's only young and silly.'

'I hope so, for his father's sake,' was the reply. 'I

don't mind speaking to him; indeed, I rather want to do so;' and he slackened the horse's pace as we approached the gate, till we were so near that there could be no excuse for the man's not hearing us.

'Good evening, Blunt,' said papa. 'How is your father—the better for the change from Wearsley, I hope?'

The young fellow *could* not but take his arms off the gate and turn round. He may have wanted to be rude—long afterwards we found that his cousin had poisoned his mind by confiding to him a most distorted version of the old story, which poor Mathew had kept religiously secret from the younger members of the family.

'That 's what comes of serving the upper classes, as they call themselves,' was Jeremy's comment upon the garbled history, which he forbade Philip to speak of to his father. 'That precious master of yours ruined my father's life, you see, and sent him off a wanderer on the face of the earth' (forgetting, no doubt, the details of the still older story that his grandiloquent quotation might have reminded his hearer of), 'and that 's how it 'll be with all who are stupid enough to give in to tyranny and oppression.'

Yes, with all this in his mind, Phil may have wanted to be rude, but the habits and instincts of generations are not to be so quickly cast off. In spite of himself, he lifted his cap as he turned at my father's greeting. But there was no smile on his handsome face;

instead, something much more easily approaching a scowl.

'Father's much the same as usual, sir,' he said, with an evident hesitation before the last word.

'No better? I 'm sorry to hear it. You don't seem in very good spirits yourself, Phil; what 's the matter? You 're still at Farmer Budge's, I suppose?'—a farm at some little distance; nearer Wearsley, in fact, than Holme Alders.

'I dunno as I 'll be able to keep my place,' growled the young fellow. 'Five mile mornin' and evenin' 's no joke.'

'But you had as far to walk when your home was at Wearsley?' said my father, determined to be patient.

Phil muttered something about 'a short-cut that way.'

'Well,' said papa, 'we must see. Perhaps I can find you something nearer home after a bit. Good evening;' and we drove on, the young fellow touching his cap again with a shade more deference, or less reluctance.

He must have been touched by papa's gentleness, or he *would* have been had his mind not been warped. And papa was as good as his word. But—all this too came out afterwards—the kinder he was, the more did Jeremy work upon Phil to make him believe this conduct was all a species of 'make-up' for the old injury.

'He'd try it on with *me*, if he dared,' said this redoubtable advocate of 'Liberty, equality, and fraternity,' 'but he knows I'd *spurn* it.'

Papa did not speak for a minute or two after we had lost sight of black-browed Phil. He seemed to be thinking deeply.

'I'm glad you know about it, little Meg,' he said. 'Some day you will be in my place here, and it's well for you to know something of the ins and outs of it all. Yes, that foolish boy is changed, and not for the better by any means. I must get rid of that Jeremy; old Mathew must be firm about it.'

The rest of the way home we were both silent, I think. That day had brought me a good deal of food for reflection—that day and the preceding one. I seemed to myself to be getting into the realities of life, and I found it very interesting.

It was a late August evening, the sky slowly fading into the starry blue of a lovely night; and as we drove along, the little breezes came to meet us with whispered good-nights, and the scents of the hedges added their delicate charm to the whole ever-returning yet never monotonous mystery of 'the morning and the evening,' the day and the night.

And far away, or sounding so at least, now and then there broke the silence the first of the wild, often inexplicable sounds that come with the darkness—so fascinating, so strangely pathetic—the hoot of an early owl, or the shriller cry of a night-jar or some

other bird of the darkness; even the distant barking of some too anxious-minded watch-dog, or the regular beat of a horse's steps as his rider rode homewards along the highway, all added to the feeling of the summer night.

'Papa,' I said suddenly, some echo of the last-mentioned kind having caught my ear—'papa, isn't it a long time since the ghostly rider has been heard? I did hear him once, you know, and old 'Tilda has heard him—I wish I had asked her about it to-day—and I shall never forget it. It was just before'——

'Meggy dear, you *must* not get so fanciful,' said papa, interrupting me almost sharply. 'If anything would make me decide on sending you away from home, to some *very* nice school, you know, where you would have charming companions of your own age, or on looking out for some perfection of a resident governess, a widow perhaps, with a nice little daughter to join in your lessons—if anything could lead me to take some step of the kind, it would be any signs of your getting nervous or fanciful from being too much alone.'

There was an odd mixture of earnest and jest in papa when he spoke like that. But I knew him, and it did not alarm me. I only cuddled up closer to him on the high seat.

'Oh papa!' I said, 'you are very naughty, and you *know* you never would. I won't speak of the ghostly rider if you 'd rather I didn't, but I 'm not a bit

frightened. I *like* to listen for it sometimes when I'm awake in the night. You know it doesn't mean always bad things. It just means sudden news, of importance to the owners of Holme Alders. And when I know *you* are safe in the house, I can't feel frightened. I might be if I heard it when you were away.'

'But our friends,' said papa. 'I have friends I care for, more or less, in several places. And you have some cousins and at least one aunt you love, not to speak of the dear people at Bray Weald.'

'Yes; but it might just as well be *good* news of them,' I persisted.

'H—m,' said papa, 'I have often felt inclined to make the old German saying, *Krankheiten kommen zu Pferde und gehen zu Fuss*, take a wider application—*troubles* I should say instead of only "illness." *Good* news, as far as my experience goes, creeps up to us slowly. No; if I believed in your pet rider, Meggie, I should certainly never wish to hear his galloping steed. You didn't hear him by chance the night before last, did you?' he added rather grimly; and I knew he was thinking of Thea, and old Peter Gladwyn's unsuspected visit.

'No,' I said, half amused at his manner in spite of my real concern for my friends, for I fancied I detected just a touch of belief in the old legend through all papa's scepticism. 'No, I didn't. I told you, papa, I have only heard him once in my life.'

'All right,' he replied; 'and if you have no objection, my dear Meg, I should *prefer* your never hearing him again.'

I laughed. That meant, any way, that I had better not speak of him again to papa. That was easily managed.

'All the same,' I said to myself half rebelliously, 'I *will* ask 'Tilda more about him, and if she has heard him lately. I haven't promised I wouldn't, and as papa's only reason is his fear of my being frightened, and as I am *not* frightened, nor likely to be (though certainly the one time I heard him I felt decidedly "queer"), I can't be doing any harm in talking about him. I'm sure it wasn't a dream that other time. If it were only dreaming, I should be pretty sure to fancy it to-night, as we've been talking about it last thing.'

But whether I dreamt at all that night or not, certainly neither in my dreams nor fancies did I hear anything of the ghostly rider. I have heard him twice since that time—three times in all in my life—once at, or rather just before, a crisis of which I must tell the whole details before long; once again, alas! not so very many years ago. And, indeed, it has never been as the precursor of good, so far as *my* experience has gone, that the sound of the galloping horse has awakened me in the night; for the first time I heard it as a child was shortly before my father received news of his only sister's death, the time he would not

let me talk about, that evening as we were driving home.

It is not an uncommon legend, I believe. I have heard of it as attached to several old families in different parts of the country. But I never heard of it in connection with *good* tidings except in our own case, and I have my doubts as to the genuineness of this version, unless it may be that the coincidence of the sound being heard before the coming of bad news has made an impression, while in the thoughtlessness often accompanying *happy* events it has passed unnoticed.

So I slept soundly, and woke the next morning in good spirits. I could not share much in papa's anxiety about Thea and Uncle Glad. I felt pretty sure they would soon be quite themselves again; indeed, I would not let myself think that this complete rupture with Mr Roland Gladwyn should be anything but a source of satisfaction.

'If he's really not sincere and truthful and nice every way,' I said to myself, 'much better to have found it out and have done with him.'

I said something of the kind to Arthur one day; to the others I never mentioned or alluded to what had happened. Arthur looked at me kindly, but with a touch of surprise too, I remember.

'I should have thought'—— he began, but checked himself. 'You are only a child after all, Meg,' he said, 'but in some ways you seem older. You are a funny

mixture—no, it wouldn't be natural for you to understand what it must be to Thea. To have had some one so mingled in one's life, as he must have got to be in hers, associated with all her interests and hopes of the future, and then to have to tear the thought out all at once, to root it up, to know that henceforth almost to think of him at all would be *wrong*. Oh! I can't fancy anything much worse; it must be much harder to bear than if any one you love and trust dies, for then'—and Arthur lowered his voice; he had all a young fellow's shrinking from allusion to the most sacred subjects—'then one could look forward, and feel the parting was only for a time.'

His gentle manner and words made me feel self-reproachful.

'Yes,' I said quickly, 'I *do* understand. I think it is partly that it makes me feel in a way *cross* for any one I care for to be really very unhappy;' and I gave myself a little wriggle of impatience. 'But, oh yes, I do understand a good deal. I can feel it must be much worse to—to have to allow to yourself you 've been caring for something not *worth* caring for than—than —well, like what you said, Arthur—for them to die.'

'Poor little Meg,' said Arthur, 'it 's all right. And, Heaven knows, I don't want to see *you* saddened. I can't imagine what we should all do without your good spirits. And you must be cheerier than ever with Thea. *She* couldn't bear to think her troubles had touched *you*.'

And for a time it really did seem as if the old bright life had not been lastingly dulled. I went over to Bray Weald in the usual way, sometimes to spend the day only; sometimes, though less frequently of course, to stay a night or two. And Thea seemed, to my childish eyes, eager to see what they wanted to see; just like herself, full of interest in the interests of those around her, self-forgetful, cheerful, and busy—too busy perhaps. I did notice a certain restlessness about her, a sort of dread of letting herself be unoccupied or idle, even for a moment, which was new to her.

The last of the summer came and went; so did the first weeks of autumn, till I began to say to myself that Christmas would soon be within countable distance; and I loved Christmas. We were the entertainers then—papa and I; we had the whole of the Weald party with us of course, and sometimes the aunt—a sister of my mother's, whom papa had described as a valued relation. We were all very fond of her and of her husband, Sir Thomas Vyner, and of their two boys; and this coming Christmas we hoped that they would be our guests.

I was talking about these plans of ours to old 'Tilda one day, when I had looked in to see her, for our family affairs always interested her; but, rather to my disappointment, she did not brighten up as she usually did at my chatter.

'Yes, missie dear,' she said; 'but Christmas isn't

here yet;' and she shook her head. 'There 's a deal might happen 'twixt now and then.'

'Of course, and "a deal might happen," as you say, 'twixt now and bedtime. What 's the matter with you, 'Tilda? Have you been hearing the midnight rider?' for that was the old name for our ghost. I had not forgotten to ask Dame Drew more about him, but when it came to close inquiry, I found that her acquaintance with him was more by hearsay than personal.

'Oh no, missie—don't 'ee go now for to think I 'm a silly old woman full of fancies and nonsense, though I can't say it 's all nonsense about the night rider, neyther. Oh no—but I 'm getting old, and I cannot look far forward. Still, it 's not right of me—no, it isn't that—to speak gloomy-like to a young thing like you.'

'And don't you get on better with your new neighbours now?' I asked. 'At least—I don't quite mean that, for I know you never quarrel with anybody—but isn't it pleasanter since that horrid Jeremy has been sent away? Papa *has* had him sent away, I know.'

'And a good riddance,' said Mrs Drew, shaking her head solemnly. 'I only hope it 's for ever and a long day, missy. And the squire did it that cleverly, too—him and Mr Arthur at the Weald. No one has the least thought *I* had told of him. They was only too good to the fellow—a-payin' his passage, or part of it, any way.'

'It was for old Mathew's sake. Papa has a great liking for him; he 's a good old man,' I said; and in this opinion 'Tilda agreed.

'He 's a quiet, self-respectin' man,' she said, 'but not for to say much in the way of company. He 's that quiet—but there, he 's had his troubles, and he 'll have more yet, I 'm sadly afraid. There 's young Phil now, as contrairy as can be.'

'Why, is he no better? I thought he 'd come all right again when the cousin was gone,' I said, with disappointment. I was doubly interested in Philip Blunt, because I knew Arthur had a liking for him, and thought there was good material below the rough, rebellious side of his character.

Again 'Tilda shook her head.

'I wouldn't care for it to be told over,' she said, 'but that there Jeremy 's poisoned the boy's mind, he has. He 's a different sort altogether; takes things deeper than that windbag of a fellow—better and wusser, you might say. He was downright mad at the squire for a-turnin' of Jeremy out, and downright mad at Jeremy for takin' the money. My goodness! they did quarrel one night, till old Mathew, he up and said he 'd tell the squire, and have the money took back if they went on so. And Jeremy saw that he meant it too, so he got afeard that he 'd come off badly, and he smoothed Phil down somehow—they went off by theirsel's and had a talk. 'Twas Milly, the second girl, as told me. She and Ruth Ann—Ruth Ann

makes dresses, you know, missie; and Milly is dairy-maid at the Well Farm—they was that scared, they thought one or other'd be killed, and they went up and down the lane half the night. But the two come back quite friendly-like again—Jeremy'd been tellin' Phil some more lies to smooth him down, no doubt, and the next day Jeremy was off.'

'And Phil—since then?' I asked.

'He's sour and black-looking, and they doesn't scarce mention squire's name before him. He's got such a rage in his heart still, the girls say,' replied 'Tilda, who, in the excitement of all she had to tell, forgot a little, I think, to whom she was speaking, for her words almost frightened me. 'But there's one good thing—he'd do anything for Mr Arthur at the Weald. And Mr Arthur speaks to him, I know, about all them flighty sayin's of Jeremy's. And he's got a good place now—nice and handy; he's nought to grumble at. He's second man at the farm where his sister's dairymaid.'

'I wonder he took it, as it's one of *our* farms,' I said.

''Twas Mr Arthur's settlin',' said the dame, 'and I shouldn't have told you all Milly told me, missie, if I'd thought a bit. He'll come right again, maybe, will Phil; he'll hear nought but good of our squire from all about. I hope I won't have made mischief by my old chatter, missie dear?'

'Oh no, of course I won't tell papa, if that's what

you mean,' I said. 'But of course it is horrid to think of his being so misjudged.'

More deeply misjudged than poor old 'Tilda had any idea of! I determined in my own mind to tell Arthur what I had heard, although it would be rather difficult to do so if he knew nothing of the old story, for I felt sure that Jeremy hated papa because he believed, or pretended to believe, that his own father had been severely and cruelly treated by mine.

'And I can't ask papa if Arthur knows about it, without papa's wondering why I asked; and I can't ask Arthur if he knows, without in a way breaking papa's confidence in me. I wonder if, after all, it would be better to tell papa what 'Tilda has told me—of course I should first have to get *her* leave to do so—and ask him if it *can* have to do with that old story? No, I scarcely think so; it would give papa a horrid feeling; and then, didn't he say he had promised old Mathew to keep it a secret? Though if Tom Blunt told it falsely, surely Mathew would be glad for Phil to know it correctly. I wish I had some one to advise me!'

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT DID HAPPEN.

I HAD a good deal to think of as I walked home that afternoon from the Four Cottages. To begin with, old 'Tilda's somewhat gloomy prognostications as to what might happen before Christmas had damped my good spirits. And then there was all this about Philip Blunt! I felt it very painfully; it was so *unfair* that the son of a man who owed so much to my father, his very life perhaps, for all I knew, should have sowed these seeds of ill-will, indeed almost of hatred, towards him. I grew hot with indignation. If I had happened to meet the young fellow just then, and he had passed me with the scowl on his face, just because I was 'the squire's daughter,' I don't know what I might not have been tempted to say, in spite of my promises! And once, for a moment or two, as I entered a thickly-hedged and rather dark bit of lane, from which a gate at one side led into a short-cut to our house, I did think I saw him coming to meet me.

For a tall figure suddenly appeared at some little distance before me—a tall figure walking quickly, but with a certain easy grace which I had already noticed in Phil Blunt, rustic though he was. My heart began to beat faster with anger at the mere idea that it might be he; but a second glance reassured me. It was Arthur. I laughed at myself for making such a mistake.

'I don't know if you will be flattered when I tell you that at first sight I took you for Phil Blunt, Arthur,' I said as we came within speaking distance.

Arthur smiled.

'I don't mind,' he said; 'he 's an uncommonly handsome fellow, not only as to his face, but he 's so well made and erect. He 's a good bit taller and broader than I;' though as he said it Arthur straightened himself with a half-boyish touch of satisfaction, for he knew he was quite as tall as any one need wish to be, and certainly carried himself to perfection.

'Is he?' I rejoined carelessly. 'If he was what *I* think him, he 'd be a horribly ugly, squinting little hunchback.'

'Meg!' exclaimed Arthur, in surprise; 'what has made you so vindictive at the foolish boy?'

I felt myself change colour; I was not prepared with an explanation.

'Oh, I'm in a bad humour, I suppose,' I replied. 'At least I'm in rather low spirits, and I was so happy this morning, making plans about Christmas.'

'And why shouldn't you still be happy in the same way?' Arthur asked.

'Oh, well, I don't know exactly. I went to see old 'Tilda, and she began about who knew what would happen between now and Christmas, and it seemed as if it was no good looking forward and being happy.'

'It's her way,' said Arthur consolingly; 'lots of old people are like that. But it's no use minding. It's quite true — no one *does* know what may happen between now and Christmas, or what may happen between now and to-morrow morning, for that matter'——

'So I said to her; at least something like that,' I interrupted.

'But, all the same,' he went on, 'we are meant to be happy in lots of ways that may be, strictly or literally speaking, unreal. Why, fancy itself is a great gift; blessings *are* blessings, whether they are permanent or not! It is right to enjoy the loveliness of a beautiful day, even though, for all I know to the contrary, I *might* be struck blind by to-morrow; and even if not, the lovely day is itself passing away for ever while we are enjoying it.'

I did not say it to Arthur, but as he spoke some words seemed to glide into my brain: 'The things that are not seen are eternal.'

'There is *something* eternal,' I thought to myself, 'something that all the other things—the seen things

—depend upon;' and Arthur's next words seemed, somehow, to be just right.

'You should not be so easily impressed, Meggy, so quickly sent up and down. There *is* reality behind all; your happy plans for Christmas are based upon your love for those who love you in return. And *that* is real, even—even if separation came, and changes, and all sorts of things that we are always close to, though it would not be right to think too much of them.'

There was a touch of sadness even in his tone of encouragement.

'Arthur,' I exclaimed quickly, 'I believe'—— but he interrupted me.

'Wait a moment, Meg,' he said. 'Tell me first what else had worried you. It wasn't only old 'Tilda's gloomy reminders. It had something to do with the Blunts—now, hadn't it?'

I could not evade this direct inquiry.

'Arthur,' I said, 'I'd like to tell you, but I can't, for it's something papa told me in confidence, and I'm in a muddle about it. I'd like to tell somebody, but I can't without his leave; and if I asked his leave, then it might do harm another way.'

'I know what your father told you,' said Arthur, to my great relief. 'He told it to me too, quite lately, and he said I might speak of it to you if ever the subject came up. But it's all over and past long ago, dear; you should put it out of your mind. Mr Lang-

holme would be sorry he had told you if he thought it troubled you.'

'It didn't,' I said; 'not till to-day. But, you see, putting two and two together, it must have something to do with Phil being so horrid to papa. Don't you think so, Arthur?'

'It may be,' Arthur replied. 'Jeremy may have told him that the gun went off by accident, and that your father had a spite against his father, and made it an excuse for getting him out of the country, or some such story—yes, it's not impossible that Phil has been told some lies of the kind. I will try to find out if I can.'

'And you don't think we need tell papa what 'Tilda says, or make *her* tell him—as a warning, I mean?' I said anxiously. 'You don't think Phil could ever try to *hurt* papa?'

Arthur started.

'Oh dear, no,' he said, with decision; 'I'm *sure* he's not like that, Meg—*quite* sure. Don't get such ideas into your head. I know I have great influence over him, but I have not yet had things quite out with him. He has never spoken against Mr Langholme to me, though I have noticed something stiff and constrained in his manner when your father was alluded to. And since your father told me that old story, I have had, like you, my own ideas about it all. I will gain his confidence, Meg, and make him tell me all *he* has been told. Trust me; I can manage it.'

His tone reassured me.

'And you will say nothing to papa?'

'Certainly not. I could not do so without your leave, and without old 'Tilda's too; and I feel sure it won't be necessary. It would only worry your father, and possibly lead to mischief of some kind. No—I must work with Phil himself, and I think he may still be got hold of for good. Now, put it all out of your head, Meggy. I am sorry to say I have something to tell you which isn't pleasant—to me at least. Meg, I am going away'——

'Arthur!' I exclaimed. 'You don't mean soon—not now? Not sooner than you thought?' I had always known that Arthur's living at home was only a temporary arrangement, but I had not dreamt of its coming to an end so abruptly. 'Arthur,' I went on, 'I thought there was something when you spoke about "separation" just now, and you interrupted me.'

'But you always knew it *would* come,' said he. 'That's just what I was reminding Thea of this morning.'

'One knows everything must come to an end *some* time,' I replied; 'but remember what you yourself said a few minutes ago, that we shouldn't think about troubles till they come.'

Arthur smiled, but his smile was rather wistful.

'I didn't mean that exactly,' he said. 'I meant that we should not let the possibility, or even certainty, of trouble and sorrow in the future cloud our enjoy-

ment of the present. And this *isn't* exactly a trouble, Meg. It's a very good thing for me. I have got the very berth with friends of my father's that he hoped I would get; and eventually it may lead to all sorts of good things.'

He did not then tell me, as he had been on the point of doing, that promotion to a really good position would probably depend on his spending some years in India.

'I don't care about the future,' I said petulantly, 'and you've been telling me it's right to live in the present. You're very contradictory, Arthur. I want things to be nice *now*, and they're all getting horrid. 'Tilda Drew was quite right to warn me.'

I was very nearly crying, to tell the truth, and I took refuge in crossness instead.

'Oh Meg, what a child you are still, after all!' said Arthur, at a loss whether to scold or laugh at me. 'If you talk like that I won't tell you any more about my plans.'

'But I would like to know them,' I said. 'I really don't see what you'd have, Arthur. Would you like me to be quite delighted at the prospect of getting rid of you?'

'Not exactly,' he replied dryly.

'Long ago,' I went on—it seemed long ago to me, though in reality it was only five or six years ago since my boy-friend had left school—'long ago, when the holidays were over, you used to like me to be

sorry when you went away, and glad when you came back.'

'Well, I hope you will be glad again when I come back at Christmas,' he said.

I brightened up a little at this.

'You might have told me so at the beginning,' I said; 'that you will be back at Christmas, I mean, instead of beginning at the other end.'

'One must go away in order to come back,' replied Arthur lightly. 'So please do go on with your plans for Christmas, Meg, in spite of old 'Tilda and her warnings.'

'But when *are* you going away?' I asked.

'Pretty soon, I fear; as a matter of fact, next week probably.'

'Next week,' I repeated dolefully. 'That's nearly as bad as if you had said to-morrow. I hate last bits of time, Arthur; I'd almost rather say good-bye to-day, and not see you again.'

'Very well,' he replied good-naturedly, 'as your little ladyship pleases. But before we say good-bye—and I mustn't stay much longer; it's getting late—before we say good-bye, I want to ask you something. I want to ask you to do something for me, Meg, when I am away. Will you do all you can to cheer up my people? I know you would do it any way, but I want you to do it specially. Don't get any ideas into your head about being a bother to them since—since this trouble of Thea's. You

will go to the Weald as much and as often as you possibly can, won't you?'

'Of course I'd like to go often—every day,' I said. 'But I am glad you have spoken of it, Arthur, for I have been just a little afraid of being in the way, and I think papa has had that feeling too. I thought perhaps I'd better not go unless Thea or your mother asked me.'

'No, no; that's just what you mustn't think,' he said eagerly. 'They *won't* ask you as much as hitherto very probably, for they have got into their heads that it is dull for you there now, and I dare say they will fear this still more when I'm gone. No, Meggy dear; *do* go—as much and as often as you possibly can. You don't know how some one *young* about cheers them up; and if Thea can help you in any way—reading French with you, or playing duets, or anything like that—it will be so good for her. I don't want her to give *all* her time to looking after the poor people.'

He was almost out of breath with eagerness by the time he had said all this. Not many young fellows of his age would have had all this thought for those he had to leave behind at his first real outset into life. Thought for me too, as well as for his very own, I felt sure. And I could not but promise all he asked, heartily and fully.

Then we talked a little more about what his life in London would be, and about Christmas, and how we

should do our best to make it happier, or less sad, for dear Thea, by being happy ourselves, and making her see how we all, in her own home, looked up to and in many ways depended upon her.

And in the end, when Arthur looked at his watch and saw that it was so late that he must hurry off at once, I withdrew my half-petulant speech about preferring not to see him again before he left, and promised, in answer to a message from his mother, which he had forgotten to give me, to go over and spend the day after to-morrow with them all at the Weald.

'I shall try to see Phil Blunt before then,' were Arthur's last words, 'for I must have a good talk with him before I go, so as to set your little mind at ease, Meg.'

If my mind had seemed full of subjects for reflection before I had met Arthur, it seemed fuller still after he had walked home with me. I was not sorry that papa was very busy that evening with papers relating to local county matters, so that he did not notice my being, as I feel sure I must have appeared, rather 'absent' and, in spite of all Arthur's good advice, a little low-spirited.

And the next morning, though I had slept soundly, I woke with that feeling which we all know, or get to know as we advance in life, of 'something being the matter.' What was it? I asked myself; and soon all that I had heard the day before returned to my

memory—clearest of all the thought of Arthur's going away.

It would make a great difference to us. He had been my chief, almost my only playfellow; and though several years older than I, I could *remember* him a boy, which makes a great difference in one's feelings. It would be very dull without him, for *somehow*, sweet and companionable as she made herself to me, I felt that Thea was changed. She had been through the fire; that was the real explanation of the touch of awe with which I now regarded her, though I did not then so define it to myself.

But I must keep up heart, and try to be of use, as Arthur had begged me, by being bright and cheerful; and Christmas would soon come.

In my secret heart there was another and a more selfish reason for my determining not to seem dull or low-spirited. In the background of my thoughts at that period of my life there was always the fear of papa, 'man-like,' making up his mind all of a sudden some fine day as to the necessity or advisability of companionship of my own age for me, if it ever should strike him that I was growing depressed or too serious. And my horror of school-life was exaggerated. Still more did I dread the idea of a resident governess; worst of all the amiable widow-lady, with a daughter of about my own age, whom papa had once, partly in fun, partly, in my heart I feared, in earnest, suggested.

'What a spoilt little girl!' some one may say; and yes, I am afraid in certain ways I *was* spoilt. But not, I trust, in the worst ways. I do not think I was selfish; with the examples around me, my nature, it seems to me, must have been very warped not to have even unconsciously caught their tone.

Those last few days before our boy left us were, to me at least, very happy ones. Looking back on them now from the far distance of nearly half a century, I feel sure that Thea and her parents exerted themselves greatly to make them so, for each other's sake, and even more, perhaps, for Arthur's and mine. And the exertion must have been a considerable one, for a cloud was slowly rising over the horizon, which neither he nor I—nor, indeed, as far as I know, Thea—suspected the existence of. I mean Uncle Glad's failing health. Papa saw it, and had once, as may be remembered, alluded to it to me. But he had never spoken of it again, and I was only too ready to forget the passing mention of it.

And even after Arthur had gone, though the blank, of course, was great, my memory recalls that late autumn and early winter as very cheerfully peaceful. I —we, for Thea was always ready to advise and to help me—set to work with preparations for Christmas; my aunt wrote to say how much she and the others were looking forward to spending it with us; which was encouraging. I no longer felt depressed when I remembered old 'Tilda's warnings, and so I told her.

'For the bad thing *has* come, you see,' I said to her one day, 'and that was Mr Arthur's going away; and now you can prophesy nice things for a change.'

At which the poor dame held up her hands in distress. When had she ever taken upon herself to be a prophet? Missie dear must have made a mistake for sure; and if she did think for'ard a bit now and then, sitting there alone and catching a peep of the chimneys of the big house over the trees, wasn't it always for the best of good luck, she hoped, for the squire and all as belonged to him?

'You are an old humbug, 'Tilda,' I said; 'and I am sure you are half, or at any rate a quarter, Irish. Aren't you now?'

But to this Dame Drew replied by shaking her head. It was just one of missie's jokes. She had always heard tell as Irish folk were great talkers; and as for her, there was many and many an hour she sat there by the window—or, in cold weather, by the fire—alone, and no one to say a word to, not even to pass the weather.

This was too much for my gravity.

'Tilda, wherever you came from, you *are* Irish,' I said. 'How can you talk if you've no one to talk to, you silly old dear? But that reminds me—don't the Blunts look in now and then? It's all pleasant with them now, isn't it?'

'Much better, missie; oh! much better,' she replied.

'Oh yes, Ruth Ann and Milly is very neighbourly when they're here. But Ruth Ann have been staying about to dressmake for some of the ladies at Bray and Wearsley a good deal this last month or two, and Milly's at the farm early and late of course. So I've hobbled in once and a way to sit with the old man; it's lonesome-like for he, and—oh! I was meanin' to tell you, missie, I had a bit of a talk one day with young Phil. He's quieted down, missie, wonderful.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' I said rather coldly, for so far I had no liking for the young fellow, in spite of what Arthur had said in his excuse; and I had never seen him to speak to since that evening I drove home with papa. Sometimes I fancied he kept purposely out of our way; for I knew his frame of mind was changed. Arthur had told me so before he left.

'I had a long talk with Phil Blunt,' he said. 'I can't tell you all about it; I am not free to do so, as a good deal was in confidence on his part. But there will be no more trouble with him. You may make your mind easy on that score, Meg.'

'You mean,' I asked—'you mean that you told him the truth, and that he believed it?'

Arthur nodded.

'Yes,' he said, 'and I am very sorry for him; and I think worse than ever—much worse—of that Jeremy, who seems a worthy son of his father. But Phil is very sore and bitter. He's angry with himself for having been made a fool of; and—well, it's easier to

get into bad ways of both thinking and doing than to get out of them. I fancy the best thing for him will be to go clear away.'

'I'm sure I wish he would,' I said. 'I don't think I believe in him at all.'

Arthur looked disappointed.

'Meg,' he said, 'I didn't think you were so vindictive.'

'Never mind,' I replied. 'I shall never do him any harm, and I only hope he may never do *us* any. But I'm glad he is going away.'

'But he is not going away *yet*,' said Arthur. 'It is not so easily arranged as all that. Indeed, it will be difficult to find anything to suit him. He has had very little education, and I am not sure about his enlisting, though that is what he wants to do himself. It would trouble poor old Mathew so.'

'Yes,' I agreed, for the mention of Mathew and what he had done, and had suffered from all his life since, always softened me; 'yes, there is certainly him to think of.'

'We must wait a while and see,' said Arthur. 'And in the meantime Phil has promised to go on quietly working at home, and to try to be a comfort to his father. And it won't be so easy for him as you might think, Meggy. There are always fellows about ready to tempt him into the "Green Oak" or some of those places. You'll give him a nod and a kind word if you come across him between now and

Christmas—for my sake, won't you, dear? I'm sure your father will.'

'Have you told papa all about it?' I asked, in some surprise.

'Oh no; only that the boy had got into bad hands, and that I hoped to get him out of them—which, indeed, your father knew already,' said Arthur. 'It would never have done to let Mr Langholme know all Phil believed. I promised Phil he never should be told it, though what your father may suspect is a different matter. And, for Mathew's sake, it would be cruel to revive the thing, unless that Jeremy had absolutely forced us to do so. Oh no; Phil would have been off to America or who knows where—lost sight of for ever probably—if he thought your father knew. And if you seemed cold to him, you see, Meg'——

'I couldn't seem "cold" to a man I've never spoken to, Arthur; you are rather absurd in your philanthropy sometimes,' I said.

'Oh, you know what I mean. You always smile and nod charmingly to the people about—your own people,' he replied. How patient he was with the spoilt child!

'I won't scowl at him, though he has often done it to me; and I won't turn away—it would be making him of far too much consequence. And I'll promise to say "Good-morning" or "Good-afternoon," or even to "pass the weather," as 'Tilda talks about, if it

would *particularly* oblige you, Mr Arthur Gladwyn,' I said teasingly.

'You would do more than that if I asked you, I am sure,' he replied quietly. 'Your bark is much worse than your bite, Miss Langholme; though I doubt if you will have the opportunity of saying anything to poor Phil. I rather suspect he will keep out of your way.'

And so it seemed to me that he had done, when I happened again to think of him, the day I had the talk with Dame Drew. And as Arthur's wishes *had* weight with me, I was not sorry to hear something about the young fellow which I might tell Arthur when I wrote to him.

'Yes,' old 'Tilda repeated, 'he's quietened down wonderful. But I'm sorry for him now and then, missie, for all he's a foolish, headstrong fellow. He don't look happy and light-hearted, as a boy—for he's little more—should do. And Ruth Ann and Milly says as it's all along of that Jeremy, and the stuff he filled his head with. Phil was bright and merry enough, they say, afore that fellow came along, though he was always, so to say, a bit spoilt, and had a peppery temper of his own. The mother, poor thing, she spoilt him a bit, I take it, for his good looks.'

Arthur was right; my bark *was* worse than my bite. I, too, felt sorry for the young man.

'But why should he look gloomy and unhappy

now?' I said. 'Jeremy's gone, and I'm sure papa or Mr Arthur won't ever let him come back again. Why can't Phil settle down and forget all the nonsense he talked?'

Tilda shook her old head.

'Ah yes, missie,' she said, using almost the same expression that Arthur had done; 'so it might seem sense for him to do. But it's none so easy as you might think to throw off grumbly, discontented feelin's and idle ways; they're a deal easier to get into than to get out of. He's just *on*settled—that's it, missie; and he's vexed with himself for having been taken in—leastways, it seems like it—and vexed with the world and everybody in it.'

'Well, he'd better get *un*vexed, then,' I said childishly.

But all the same I was sorry for Phil Blunt.

I dare say it was a good thing that I had had this talk with my shrewd old friend, for as I was walking home I met him. It was quite winter now, though early winter. The lane was no longer darkened by the thick leafage of the bordering trees; on the contrary, one could see up through the fine tracery of the bare branches to the cold gray-blue sky beyond.

And as again a tall, erect figure came into sight, there was no possibility of mistake this time. It was certainly not Arthur. 'Poor Arthur,' I thought, 'scribbling away by gaslight no doubt, in a stuffy London office! But Christmas is coming.'

The thought lightened my heart and gave spring to my footsteps; and when Phil Blunt came within speaking distance I greeted him amiably.

'Good-day,' I said. 'Isn't it getting cold? I hope we shall have some skating when Mr Arthur comes back at Christmas.'

He stood stock-still, crimsoning all over his sunburnt cheeks and forehead right up to the roots of his dark hair.

'Yes, miss,' he said, lifting his cap, 'I hope so too.'

But not the ghost of a smile lit up his face or eyes, and his voice was gravity itself. Yet his bearing and tone were entirely respectful.

'What a queer fellow he is!' I thought as, with a little movement of my head, I passed on.

CHAPTER V.

A COMPANION OF MY OWN AGE.

PAPA was standing in the hall when I got home that afternoon. He had just ridden back from one of his perpetual magistrates' meetings or something of the kind at Bray. He turned towards me at once. I always thought he looked so nice in his riding-things, even though he was splashed with mud all over, for our roads forty years ago were not what they are now.

'A letter for you, Meg,' he said. 'I called for the afternoon mail.'

We were exceedingly proud of our afternoon mail. It was quite a new institution, and Bray was one of the very first smaller provincial towns to achieve the distinction of having one.

'It is from Aunt Lucy,' I said with pleasure, somewhat damped, however, by a second thought. 'I do hope it 's not to say they cannot come for Christmas. She wrote only last week.'

'I hope so too,' said papa, though half absently, for he was already in the middle of his *Times*.

I opened my letter with some misgiving.

'It's all right!' I exclaimed; 'at least *almost* all right. Papa'——

'Well, old woman?'

He looked up, or down rather, from his paper. He knew at once by my tone that it *wasn't* quite 'all right.'

'Who is Mon—no, *Morna* Sweyn? Did you ever hear of her?'

'Sweyn,' he repeated; 'Morna Sweyn. There are some Sweyns connected with your uncle's family, but I don't distinctly remember about them. And I don't think I ever heard of a Morna Sweyn. Who is she, and what about her?'

'She's—oh yes,' I went on, referring to my letter, 'she's a cousin of Uncle Vyner's—and—papa'——

'Well, my dear? You make me quite nervous.'

'They—auntie wants to bring her here with them next month,' I replied, very lugubriously. 'She is nearly sixteen, two years older than I, and she has nowhere to go for her holidays, as her father and mother are abroad somewhere. And Aunt Lucy says she is very nice,' I added, to tell the truth, somewhat reluctantly.

Papa, on the contrary, beamed with satisfaction.

'Capital,' he said; 'just the very thing I have always wanted for you—a companion of your own

'What's the matter, little woman?' he said, in a kind but rallying tone.

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age, Meg. Come with them; of course she must, and be most heartily welcome. And when you get to know her, we can ask her to spend some of her holidays here on her own account. Any girl whom your Aunt Lucy likes you are sure to take to, eh, Meg?'

I did not at once reply. Papa sat down on one of the old carved oak chairs in the hall, and drew me to him.

'What's the matter, little woman?' he said, in a kind but rallying tone.

I gave a little wriggle. I did not want to vex him, but I was not feeling very amiable.

'Never mind,' I said. 'I needn't write to my aunt to-day; the post's just going. There isn't anything really the matter, papa, but people can't help having feelings.'

'No; but they can help having *foolish* feelings,' he replied. 'And I rather suspect there is something of that kind in question just now. Is there not, now?'

I hesitated.

'Papa,' I said, 'I don't want companions of my own age. I have done very well without them till now. Besides, this girl isn't my own age. She is two years older, just enough to make her think herself quite grown up compared with me. And, papa, I *like* being the only girl. I have always so enjoyed Terry and Ned coming for the holidays; I like boys, and I've often been really glad they had no sisters.

I'm quite sure this Morna will be stuck-up and conceited; I *know* she will be.'

'But Aunt Lucy says she's nice.'

'Well, so she may be to *her*. She wouldn't dare to be anything else to a grown-up lady, and especially to any one like Aunt Lucy, who is, you know, papa, rather grand and frightening to any one who doesn't know her well. And Morna can't know her very well. She's only a cousin, and she has never stayed with the Vyners before.'

Papa listened, smiling now and then, but in a grave sort of way.

'Oh, my dear little daughter!' he said, 'you will find out for yourself that there are troubles enough in life without making them beforehand. Wait and see. We cannot, of course, refuse to welcome this young girl, but if you do not like her, you may be sure I shall not force you to make friends with her, or to invite her again. But in the meantime do, dear, put all these fancies out of your head, like a wise little woman.'

I murmured something. I could not exactly promise to do what he asked, but I knew I was very silly. And to some extent I succeeded in conquering my prejudice. But I have never forgotten that conversation. It is difficult for me now to realise that I could ever have associated anything that was not happy and sweet and lovable with Morna's pretty name. We are both old women now, but to

me she seems always the same—truest of sister-like friends.

Yes, about that time of my life, I see now I was in real danger of getting spoilt.

I did not tell Thea my misgivings about Morna. I was in my heart ashamed of them. And as papa had brought me up with very strict notions of what was due to any one in the position of a guest, I did my best, in planning all the arrangements for our Christmas party, to think of everything that a girl *somewhere*, at least, about my own age would be likely to appreciate or enjoy; for which I had my reward. It is a curious and happy fact in human nature that there is no better way of making oneself like another than to try to benefit this other in some way. So by the time I had had fresh chintz covers looked out for Miss Sweyn's room, and made a selection of some of my own favourite story-books for the little bookcase by the fire, and chosen a few of the very daintiest old china ornaments in our collection for the quaint three-cornered cupboard which our young friend's eyes would light upon from her little bed when the wintry sunshine awoke her in the morning—by the time I had done all these things, I began to feel quite benevolently disposed towards the person for whose comfort and gratification they were intended. And all shadow of prejudice or jealousy—for I do believe unrecognised, I might almost say unconscious jealousy is at the root of a great

deal more evil in this world than any one realises—melted away for good and all, as if it had never existed, at the first glimpse of Morna's dear little face.

She was not the very least like what I had expected. Though not at that time actually smaller than I, she seemed so; for my height was that of a half-grown girl who is going to be tall, and suffers in the process from a certain amount of clumsiness and lankiness, especially as regards arms and legs, hands and feet; whereas Morna had a finished look about her, though slight with the slightness of early youth. The expression 'fairy-like' is hackneyed and silly, but I can find no other which describes her so well. I thought my hair fair, but it was darker than hers, and my eyes were gray-green compared with the blue of Morna's. *True* blue, too; for there are varying, widely varying types of blue eyes—some inspiring a sense of shallowness, almost of soullessness, in spite of their undeniable beauty; some that one can scarcely believe beautiful, so cold and hard is their expression, or lack of it, rather.

Morna's eyes belonged to neither of these categories, they made me think of forget-me-nots, not of turquoises.

We were standing on the hall-steps when they arrived—the Vyners and their young cousin—late that evening, the 23d of December. It was cold, I remember; very cold, bright, and frosty; just the

weather I had hoped for; and papa threw a warm coat over me, one of his own fur-lined ones, which was hanging just inside. He did not forbid my braving the night-air, for he liked to have me beside him, on the spot, to welcome our guests: it was in accordance with his notions of hospitality.

'I wish they would come!' I exclaimed impatiently. 'Can it *not* have been the carriage, after all, that we heard, papa?'

For at a certain angle the road from the station approached us more nearly than a little farther on, and anything passing that point could be heard some minutes before entering our drive, especially in clear, still weather — frosty weather above all, when sound carries far.

'No, no,' papa replied; 'it was the carriage. Listen —you will hear it again in a moment or two!'

How very still it was! Suddenly there recurred to my mind the legend of the spectral rider; suppose we heard him now. I must have shivered a little.

'Meg,' said papa, 'you are catching cold. Go in, dear. I will call you as soon as I hear the wheels, I promise you.'

But I clung to him.

'Oh, do let me stay!' I said; 'I am not cold. It was only—just at that moment I thought of the ghost—the galloping ghost, you know, papa, and I said to myself, "Suppose we heard him now."'

'*Meggy*,' said papa in a tone of reproach, 'you pro-

mised—you haven't been fancying you heard the rider again?'

'No, indeed I haven't. I really don't think it has come into my head for a long time, so don't be vexed with me, papa.'

And the sound that broke the stillness was not the thud, thud of the ghostly horse—by-the-bye, noiselessness is the rule with apparitions of the kind; I wonder how our ghost came to be an exception—but the welcome roll of our own carriage, and the comfortable jog-trot of the sleek pair that drew it. Our family familiar was capricious in his visits; for, alas! ill news was not very far off that Christmas.

'There they are!' I cried; 'and now, papa, you should be quite happy. Your—what is that long word?—pana—something—your care for all my wants and imperfections, "a companion of my own age," is driving up the avenue as fast as fat old Jack and Jill will bring her. They do pick up a little when they are close to the stable, lazy old things. Here she comes; oh dear! oh dear!'

Papa laughed, but I think he was pleased to hear me joking about Miss Sweyn's arrival.

'You are an impertinent little'—— But there was no time for more. The chestnuts had 'perked up' to some purpose. We could hear the boys shouting as they caught sight of our figures standing out against the glow of the well-lighted hall behind us, where a great log-fire was blazing.

'Uncle Hill,' they exclaimed—my father's Christian name was Hillyer—'Uncle Hill and Meggy! Here we are, as jolly as anything, but awfully hungry.'

And out they tumbled somehow. I don't know if they had been on the box, or in the rumble behind with Aunt Lucy's maid, or inside, or where—they got out somehow. They were thorough-going boys, and were on the steps beside us before the coachman had pulled up.

'All well?' said papa, shaking hands with his nephews both at once. 'So glad to see you, aren't we, Meggy?'

Ned pressed up against me.

'Quick, Meg,' he whispered; 'there's just time for a word. She,' with a jerk of his head towards the carriage, which by this time had come to a standstill —'she's all right, very jolly. I knew you'd like to know. I meant to have written, but letters are such a nuisance. You won't mind her a bit. Only she's in an awful funk at *you*, Meg; so you mustn't be what you call it—stuck-up, you know, as you can be sometimes.'

My uncle and aunt and a third smaller figure were coming up the steps as he stopped. The first two kissed me with the usual kindly words:

'Dear little girl'—'My darling Margaret;' and then followed, 'And here is Morna. Morna, this is Margaret.' Aunt Lucy was the only person who in those days gave me my stately three syllables.

Ned's whisper had been most politic. There was something both gratifying to my dignity and appealing to the gentler side of my nature in the idea of any one—and that 'any one' a girl older than myself—being afraid of *me*. I doubt if Morna would otherwise have received quite so hearty a kiss as I at once bestowed upon her; and though I could scarcely see her face, the pleasant impression on my mind was at once increased by her first words:

'Oh, how nice of you! I was so hoping you would kiss me!'

Then we all went in together. It was long past dinner-time, for which our usual hour in those old-fashioned days was half-past six; so, as we had often done before when we were expecting the Vyners on a visit, dinner had been turned into a less formal meal under the name of supper. Nowadays it takes us only three or four hours to reach my cousins' home, thanks to the great increase of railways, but forty years ago they had a long distance to travel by road before they reached a station at their own end.

The boys and I had to submit to the usual agreeable remarks from our respective parents as to how much we had grown and whom we were getting 'more and more like.' We always hated these observations—all children do, I think, and increasingly the nearer they approach to the elysium of grown-upness. But it seemed to interest our elders so much that we submitted with philosophy. I think I would have

submitted to anything that evening with more than philosophy; I was so charmed with the dreaded 'companion of my own age.' And the fun which every now and then gleamed in her pretty eyes completed her conquest of me.

We sat over the supper-table a little to talk. It was not worth while going into the drawing-room.

'You must be tired, Lucy,' said papa, 'and Miss'——

But Morna looked up quickly.

'Oh, not Miss Anything, please, Mr Langholme,' she said. 'Just Morna.'

Papa smiled. I could see how glad he was that all my fears and prejudice had disappeared.

'Well, *Morna*, then. Are you not both very tired?'

'A little,' said my aunt.

But 'Not at all,' said Morna; 'I love travelling and *arrivings*,' she added naïvely. 'I think there 's nothing so delightful as arriving anywhere on a visit.'

Papa smiled again. There was something delightful about *her*. It was like the confidingness of a little child sure of its welcome.

'I am glad you are not tired,' he said, 'for I warn you that my Meg here is quite a tyrant when she wants anything done. Terry and Ned can stand it, but you must defend yourself, Morna.'

He patted me so affectionately as he spoke that no one could possibly have misunderstood him. I answered in the same tone:

'Yes, Morna, we've got heaps to do—the church to decorate;' for on Christmas Day even our rather puritanically inclined vicar approved of holly-wreaths with plenty of bright scarlet berries, though Easter and other of the great festivals were in this respect ignored. 'Yes, there's the church to do, and I've got some quite new ideas about it, and'——

'In spite of Mr Milton,' interrupted my uncle, 'and?'——

'Meg, you must be careful,' added papa.

'All right,' I said, nodding confidently. 'If he grumbles I'll set Morna at him; he'd never be able to resist *her;*' which made Morna blush. 'And some of the old women's packages have still to be done; I couldn't finish weighing the tea to-day. And all our own servants' presents need tying up and labelling, and Uncle and Auntie Glad's, and all the Weald, and'——

'My dear child, you take my breath away!' exclaimed Aunt Lucy, laughing. 'That reminds me, Hillyer, she went on, turning to papa, 'are you expecting the Gladwyns for Christmas?'

'Of course,' he replied; 'they come to-morrow for three or four days as usual.'

'Oh!' said my aunt, and her voice grew a trifle hard. She liked the Gladwyns in themselves, but she had her own reasons for not altogether approving of our great intimacy. Aunt Lucy was a good woman, but not without a touch of worldliness, and I do believe

she cared for me, and was ambitious for me exactly as if I had been her own daughter. 'I was not sure,' she went on; 'I heard some rumours—they have had some worries lately.'

'Yes,' said papa in the peculiarly clear, distinct way that he spoke when not quite pleased—'yes, they have had worse than worries; they have had to bear the shock of a great disappointment in one they thoroughly trusted.'

'Ah yes, very painful,' murmured Lady Vyner. 'I was not sure if—under the circumstances—then are they *all* coming?'

'Mr and Mrs Gladwyn, and Thea Weybridge, and Arthur Gladwyn, of course,' said papa.

And Aunt Lucy had the good taste to say no more. Indeed, she added that she would be very pleased to see Mrs Gladwyn again, she was such a sweet woman.

'Some one said,' she went on with less tact, 'that poor Mr Gladwyn was looking very ill—failing, and he has always been a delicate man.'

Papa's face shadowed, and my own, I have no doubt, grew troubled. I loved Uncle Glad dearly, and this abrupt way of discussing his health startled me.

'He has not said anything as to feeling ill lately,' papa replied shortly.

'I am glad to hear it,' said Aunt Lucy, and she meant what she said. 'It would be a terribly serious matter for them if—if anything happened to him,

would it not? The young fellow, the son, cannot be making anything as yet.'

'He is doing, or is likely to do, very well,' said papa. 'If I had a son of my own, I should be only too happy to see him, at Arthur's age, in the same position.' How pleased I felt at this! I determined to repeat it to my boy. 'And as to what you allude to—no, there would be nothing *terrible* about the dear people's case. But we have got on to rather gloomy talk, and, in spite of Morna's protestations, I think, my little lady, that you and Meggy here had better get to bed, and to sleep as fast as you can, if you are to be in good trim for all this work to-morrow.'

We got up at once. *I* understood, and I think Morna did—for I never knew any one with quicker perception—that papa wished to be left alone with my uncle and aunt for a little.

'I dare say,' I thought to myself, 'he is going to warn Aunt Lucy not to say any more about dear Thea and Uncle Glad. Aunt Lucy is kind, but she certainly hasn't much tact.'

And I fancy my surmise was correct, for during their visit I never heard any more allusion to Thea's trouble; and as for the other subject of Aunt Lucy's remarks—Uncle Glad's failing health—alas! that was soon—but I had better go straight on.

We all four, Terence and Ned, as well as Morna and I, said good-night to the grown-up people, and went off

together. The hall here goes right up to the roof—very high for a not very big house—and is lighted, like the clerestory in a church or cathedral, by windows whose only *raison d'être* is to achieve this object, certainly not to be looked through, except by the servant who at stated periods has to climb up on a very tall ladder to clean them. They are pretty, quaintly-shaped windows, each with a coloured coat-of-arms in the centre, all different—for our family has intermarried with other good old stock, and we have plenty of respectable quarterings—and each with a border of red, green, yellow, or blue glass—no two the same. And the effect of either sunshine or moonlight coming through is often very curious and picturesque—especially, I think, that of moonlight.

The moon, I remember, was very bright that evening, and to add to the strange mingling of colours, the wood-fire was now burning with a deep, ruddy glow, only occasionally darting out a vivid flame, like a volcano unwillingly subsiding after an eruption.

As we entered the hall by the swing-door which led to the wide passage whence opened the dining-room and library, Morna gave a little exclamation of pleased surprise.

'What a *lovely* old house this is!' she said. 'I had not noticed this charming hall properly before;' and she stood and looked about her with great interest.

It is partly the moonlight and partly the fire that make light on the fair, eager face, in its soft frame of clustering hair.

'We often sit in the hall, but it is so picturesque just now,' I said, admiring, on my side, the pretty effect of the mingled glow and cold weather. 'It is, of course, rather draughty, on account of the archway up in the gallery;' and I pointed to the spot I alluded to.

There is a gallery along one side—one end rather, I should say, of the hall, which is slightly oblong. This gallery faces you as you enter by the front-door, and a staircase, in two branches at first, which join half-way up into one—a staircase of wide, shallow steps—leads to it. And just in the centre is the open doorway—the archway, as we call it—through which you pass to all the first floor rooms and passages. The second floor is only reached by the back staircases, of which there are two, one better than the other, from the basement to the top of the house. This arrangement gives the house the look and feeling of being larger than it really is.

'You must show me all through it to-morrow, Meggy, won't you?' said Morna.

'Of course I will, though there isn't very much to show,' I said. 'It is not nearly as large as Vyners.'

'It's much jollier, though. Vyners is all so straight and prim—not the least bit romantic,' said Terry. 'And oh, Meg,' he went on mischievously, 'be sure you show Morna the haunted room.'

Morna caught hold of my hand.

'The haunted room,' she repeated. 'Oh, Meg! is it true?'

'No, of course not,' I said; 'it is only Terry's nonsense. We have no haunted room.'

Morna gave a little sigh, partly of relief, but partly, I suspected, of disappointment! So I did not 'snub' the irrepressible Terence when he went on again:

'I don't see much "of course" about it, Miss Meg. If there isn't a haunted room, Morna, there's a ghost attached to the family, and that's as good—or as bad—isn't it?'

'Is there, really?' said his cousin. 'I hope you don't mind, Meggy, but I think I'm rather glad. Will you tell me all about it?'

'Yes—there's really nothing scarcely to tell. But I will tell you all there is to-morrow. I don't care to talk about it last thing at night,' I added candidly, 'for it might make me dream about it, and then'——

'Then what? Is it so very frightening?'

'Oh no; I don't know that it's frightening at all. They say it *needn't* be, but—I don't know. But what I was going to say was, that if I dreamt of it I might fancy it was real, and I don't want to do that. And besides, it's so difficult to be quite—truthful, quite exact about things of the kind—so difficult not to be fanciful or to exaggerate. And if

there *is* anything real about such things, I 'm sure we should treat them in a careful, real way.'

Morna seemed much impressed.

'Meggy,' she said, 'I feel just now as if I should call you Margaret, if not Miss Langholme. I feel a tiny bit afraid of you, do you know? You take things so deeply and seriously. Is she always like that, boys?'

'Yes,' said Terry; 'she needs shaking. She 's awfully sensible and beyond her years, and all manner of horrible things like that, mamma says.'

'Terry!' exclaimed dear little Ned indignantly, 'how *can* you? Mamma never said anything that wasn't as nice as nice about Meg. She would be very angry indeed if I told her you said she said there was anything "horrible" about'——

'Shut up!' said Terry. 'Meg understands, and so does Morna. It isn't mamma, it is I myself that think being sensible and all that kind of solemn rubbish is horrible. But *I* don't think Meg is so very bad after all. She 's a lot of mischief in her. You 'll see if she hasn't, Morna.'

I laughed; Terry's description of my character only amused me. He was just a boy, though a nice boy too, and I felt myself years and years older than he of course, being a girl, though in reality I was some months his junior.

Then we ran upstairs, and through the archway to our respective quarters. Morna's room was very

near mine, but this first night, in consideration of her long journey, and that she *should* be tired if she wasn't, I told her I would neither volunteer a visit to her nor invite her to pay me one.

And, full of bright anticipations of the pleasure before us during the next few days, we bade each other good-night.

CHAPTER VI.

A SUDDEN BLOW.

NOR were these bright anticipations unrealised. There were shouts of laughter from my own quarters all the next morning, where—in the schoolroom, which in the holidays became a very unstudious-looking place—I had collected my staff—Morna and the two boys. Laughter enough to have shaken Aunt Lucy's belief in my premature possession of wisdom 'beyond my years,' and the other 'horrible' qualities with which, according to Terence, she credited me—laughter enough to have set my dear father's mind at rest on the score of my too great seriousness.

It did please him greatly to hear it, for once or twice he put his head in at the door for a moment to see, as he said, 'how we were getting on,' and to ask if anything were wanted in the shape of a groom to ride to Bray with forgotten commissions, or some more gardeners to help with the church decorations in the afternoon; and each time his kind face lighted

up with smiles when he saw the excellent terms we were all on.

It pleased some one else too. For Arthur, who had arrived at home for his holiday the night before, was not satisfied to wait till the rest of the Weald party drove over in the afternoon, and made his appearance just before luncheon.

I heard the door open and glanced up, thinking it was papa again, or, just possibly, Aunt Lucy.

'We have nearly finished the wreaths,' I cried, 'and all the parcels are tied up. Oh!'—— and with a little scream, I flew to the door.

'Oh Arthur, my boy, how nice of you!' I exclaimed, springing up to give him the usual 'little sisterly kiss,' never omitted on great occasions. 'When did you arrive? You've come to stay?'

'Certainly, if you will have me,' he replied. 'My father and mother and Thea will be here in good time for dinner, and my portmanteau is coming with their luggage. But I thought—and I see I was right'—as he glanced round at the business-like untidiness of the room—'I thought this sort of thing would be going on, and that I might be of use, even though I knew you had the boys,' with whom he was shaking hands as he spoke.

'*And* Morna,' I said, drawing her forward. 'Should I say Miss Sweyn? You don't know what a help she is with the church things, Arthur; and so will you be, of course—in putting them up. Oh, I *am* so glad you

have come over early. Have you been very home-sick in London, you poor thing?'

Arthur laughed. He had given a little start of surprise when he first caught sight of Morna, and I could see that he was struck by her sweetness and beauty, which pleased me; and now, when I spoke of 'home-sickness,' a little pathetic expression stole into her face, which made her look prettier still.

'Sometimes,' he said; 'very home-sick now and then, at first. And if I had not been very busy, I dare say it would have been still worse. But when one has to work hard, you see, one has no time for dreaming.'

'I shouldn't call home-sickness "dreaming,"' I said. 'I only had it once, and that was when papa sent me to the seaside without him, or Thea, or any of you; that time after I had the hooping-cough, do you remember? "Dreaming" indeed!' with a touch of indignation; 'I know it was horrible, real misery.'

'But one suffers horrible, real misery *in* dreams,' said Morna, 'and I *do* know what home-sickness is; it is almost more like the misery one feels in some dreams than any waking feeling—a perfect *cloud* of misery.'

'Poor little Morna,' I said. 'Were you ever as bad as that, Arthur?'

'No, not quite. I had not time to be. And when I said "dreams," I did not mean it quite as you took it. I was thinking of pleasant dreams too. And thoughts of home are that, however they may be mingled with

longing to be there. But it wouldn't do to indulge in them when one has hard, practical work on hand, and work which must be done well, if any good is to come of it.'

'Oh Arthur!' I exclaimed, 'that reminds me—Morna, I *must* whisper to him; don't think me very rude—there is something I must tell you before I forget.'

I made him come over to the window with me, and then I repeated to him papa's remarks about him the night before. I was surprised, almost startled, at the effect of my words. The dear boy crimsoned up to the roots of his hair.

'Really?' he said; 'he really said that? I *am* pleased, Meggy. It was very good of you to tell me. Thank you, dear. I hope'—— and he hesitated.

'What do you hope?'

'Oh, well—it isn't worth saying, and it sounds rather priggish. I was only going to say I hope Mr Langholme will always think of me in the same way.'

'Of course he will. No, he won't,' I added mischievously, amused to see Arthur's changing expression. 'He'll think better and better of you as time goes on—you'll see if he doesn't. And so will I if only you don't go and do something horrid and unforgivable, like going off to India some fine day all of a sudden, and marrying a—a *she*-nabob. What's the proper word for a lady-nabob, Morna?' I called out. 'You should know, as you belong there.'

'There's no such thing, you silly girl,' said Terence. 'A nabob's a white man, or a yellow one, any way, who's gone out to India and made a fortune. Women don't do that; and if they did, nobody would want to marry them when they were about a hundred years old.'

'Does it take as long as that to make a fortune, Terry?' said Arthur, smiling. 'I hope not. At least *I* hope to make a moderate one long before I'm *half* a hundred years old.'

He was crossing the room again to examine our Christmas decorations, when a sudden thought struck him, and he moved back to where I was still standing, looking out on the frost-covered lawn and the evergreens with their light drapery of snow; for there had been a slight fall of it in the night.

'What a wonderful place this world of ours is, after all!' I was saying to myself. 'To think of the contrasts in it, tiny as we are told it is, compared with other worlds.'

For a vision had come before me of that far-off East, that India, of which even fifty years ago people were beginning to speak so familiarly, as if it were not much farther off than Paris or Rome. And I seemed to see the beautiful cloudless blue of the Orient sky, and the scorching, pitiless sun, and to feel a blast of the awful heat! A contrast indeed with our simple English winter scene.

'Oh no,' I said to myself, 'Arthur must not go

to that dreadful India.' And I half unconsciously shuddered. Then I heard his voice beside me.

'I wanted to ask you, Meg,' he began; but he broke off abruptly—'What's the matter, child? Are you shivering?'

'Oh no,' I replied; 'it was only—only something that came into my head that I didn't like to think of.'

'Don't think of it, then,' he said in a rallying but scarcely satisfied tone.

'What is it you want to ask me?' I inquired.

'It was about Phil Blunt. Have you ever come across him?'

'How you tease about that boy!' I said petulantly. 'You needn't have begun about him the very first moment, really.' But I felt ashamed of myself when I saw his face shadow. 'Yes, I have seen him two or three times, but only once to speak to, and that time it was really I that *made* him stop.'

'That was very good of you,' said Arthur, his eyes brightening again. 'I hope he appreciated it.'

'Oh, he was perfectly respectful, and all that,' I said. 'Quite different from the other time. Not sulky or scowling, but awfully gloomy. I never saw a young person look so dull and grim.'

'I am sorry for that,' said Arthur, 'though I half expected it.'

'And it wasn't because it was *me*,' I added, with some eagerness. 'I don't suppose he has any idea

that I have ever heard that old story—either the correct version or the garbled one?'

Arthur shook his head.

'I am sure he has no thought of the kind,' he agreed.

'And it wasn't as if papa had been with me. For, though he *can't* hate papa now, he might feel constrained with him. No, he's like that almost always, I fancy. 'Tilda Drew says she feels quite "sorry-like" for him; and I don't know but what I do too. She says he's got a queer, gloomy temper, and that he sees that cousin made a fool of him, and now, I suppose, he's ashamed and mortified. Very likely that Jeremy and his friends at the "Green Oak" flattered him up for their own purposes; and 'Tilda says, like you, Arthur, that it's easier to get into bad ways than out of them.'

'I must have a talk with Dame Drew,' said Arthur. 'I hope she doesn't think the boy is taking to drinking.'

'She didn't say so,' I replied, 'but I fancy she does think he'd be better away from here.'

'I fancy so too. I must see about it,' said Arthur; and then we both went back to the others, who were clamouring for us to give our attention to the *chef-d'œuvre* of our holly trophies.

The dear people from the Weald arrived in good time. I never saw Thea looking sweeter. Morna fell in love with her on the spot, though the pleasure

her admiration gave me was tempered by her whispered:

'Does she always look so awfully delicate, Meg? Her face is almost transparent.'

'She's much stronger than she looks,' I replied hastily. 'Many people are. You yourself, I dare say, for one, Morna.'

And I was glad to notice that Uncle Glad seemed decidedly better. He moved less feebly, and was in excellent spirits. I think he was feeling so happy at having Arthur at home again for a while that everything had become *couleur de rose*.

All conspired together happily for that Christmas to stand out in my memory as a very flawless day. The weather was perfect. Everybody's presents were exactly what everybody had been secretly and hopelessly sighing for ever since he or she was born—ever since last Christmas, or present-giving time, any way. And Aunt Lucy was in the best of good humours.

Not that she was ever in a *bad* one, in the common sense of the expression. Aunt Lucy's humours were peculiar, and she herself was probably completely unconscious of their variability, of their very existence I dare say, for she prided herself on her perfect equability and evenness of temper and spirits. And, to do her justice, I don't think she ever did lose her own temper, but, which was quite as uncomfortable, and certainly much more

humiliating to those about her, when things were not to her mind she had a really extraordinary talent for making those others lose *theirs*.

How it was done I have never been able to discover. She did not mean it; of that I feel certain; but she *did* it, all the same. Words and allusions, in themselves really 'airy nothings'—for she was *not* spiteful—dropped from her lips, which, at their mildest, made you wonder *why* you were feeling cross, 'rubbed the wrong way,' and, after a time, if the phase continued, really ashamed of your own irritation and irritability. For she would turn to you, when these uncomfortable sensations had broken bounds at length in some distinctly 'cross' ebullition, with real, not feigned, sympathy. Were you over-tired?—had you a headache?—the weather, perhaps? I have seen my father at such times in a state of polite fury impossible to describe, though he really loved his sister-in-law, as I did myself, and as she deserved of us.

But this Christmas we were not favoured with any of the good lady's moods. She was geniality itself—really pleased to meet Auntie Glad, gently admiring of Thea, and not too ready to remark her evident fragility. Perhaps, indeed, it touched her really kind woman's heart, as she knew something vaguely as to its cause. And she was delighted at Arthur's notice of her boys, and grateful for it.

How well I remember it all!—the crowded church; our pride in the decorations; the Christmas hymns.

The church is quite altered now, 'restored,' in the literal sense of the word, to its ancient and original beauty, for it dates very far back, long before the Reformation; and no one was more eager than myself for such 'restoration,' or more delighted to see it carried out as perfectly as has been done; but, for all that, there was something about the old state of things, the high pews and all the rest of it, that fills me with a curious sense of pathos when I recall it. *They* meant well, too, no doubt, those grim 'Protestant' Reformers—many of them at least. They were so sure they were doing God's work; so incapable of realising the possibility of going too far, of flinging away with the 'abuses' so much of the sacred mystery and 'beauty of holiness' that underlay them — so much that it will take more than one or two clearer-sighted generations to revive it again. I sometimes even now shut my eyes in our dear, spotlessly-correct little church, and try to fancy it all as I first remember it, and when I open them again I find that they are dimmed.

Ah, that 'first remembering'! How it clings to one! Nothing in after-life becomes so entirely a part of one's self—nothing, again, from the primroses in the spring to the glow of the most perfect summer's day, or the marvel of some far-famed Italian landscape—*nothing* beautiful has quite the same exquisiteness of beauty, nothing wonderful the same touch of magic.

For the child-heart has grown old; not less loving

or true, but not the same. The child-eyes have been taught and trained to admire or wonder more wisely. It is the same in everything—we cannot gain without losing; death in one form or another must precede new life.

'The church never looked half so pretty as this Christmas, did it, Meg?' said little Ned. We often called him '*little* Ned,' though he was nearly as old as I; for he had been a delicate child, and was still small and fragile-looking in comparison with vigorous Terry. And he did not live to be 'big Ned,' dear little fellow.

'No,' I replied, 'it never looked so pretty before;' and in my heart of hearts, I am not sure that I think it has ever 'looked so pretty' again. I was saying this to myself in my own mind this Christmas, only a few days ago, as I walked home holding the hand of another 'little Ned,' a grandson this time, not a cousin.

The Gladwyns left us the next day, with promises that we should see the old year out and the new one in with them at the Weald; and besides this, we made many plans for meeting during Arthur's all too short holidays. For the skating was excellent that year, and it was a debated point whether our small 'lake' or the Weald big pond was the better. So we took them turn about.

Morna, the two boys, and I walked over to the Weald to luncheon the day after they left, and found

them all well and cheerful; only Thea was too tired to skate. She tried, but had to give it up after a round or two. And when her step-father heard it, he declared she must have a tonic. He would speak to Dr Holt about it the next day, when he was to be at Bray.

That next day saw the scene of our amusement changed to the Holme Alders lake. We skated there till nearly dark, and then persuaded Arthur, who had joined us, to stay to dinner, which was to be a less formal and unusually early meal, as a servants' party was in train. Thea had promised to come over for it, if she could, Arthur said, so we were at first in nowise startled when, just as we were about to leave the dining-room, we heard wheels driving up very rapidly to the front-door.

'Thea, no doubt,' her brother said. 'She seems in a hurry. Perhaps she hoped to get here in time for some dinner in the first place,' he added, with a smile.

But the smile quickly faded from his face when in another moment Fellows, our butler, came hurrying into the room and made his way straight to Arthur.

'Mr—Mr Gladwyn, if you please, sir'—— he began, and then I noticed that he was very pale. 'Mr Gladwyn is not very well, and they have sent over for you. Would you please come at once?'

Arthur started to his feet; he was as pale as death,

and for a moment or two he seemed as if he could not speak. My father pushed his own glass of port wine across to him, with a gesture which the poor boy understood. He rarely touched wine of any kind, and the effect was instantaneous; almost as soon as he had swallowed half of it the colour began to return, and he pulled himself together.

'Tell me,' he said to Fellows, 'what is it? You know more, I can see. Who has come over?'

Fellows glanced at my father, who nodded.

'No good keeping it back,' he half whispered, though I could see that he himself was greatly agitated.

By this time we were all on our feet. I had stolen round to my poor boy, and caught hold of one of his hands.

'It is only the groom, sir,' Fellows began. 'There was no one else to come. Dr Holt is there.'

Arthur turned in surprise. 'Holt already there!' he exclaimed half indignantly; 'and they did not send for me before!'

'If you please, sir, Mr Arthur,' said Fellows nervously, 'it—it was Dr Holt that—that brought him home. It was at Bray it happened. He—the poor gentleman, sir, was just stepping into his dog-cart, when—when the horse started, or it was a sudden giddiness that took Mr Gladwyn—the doctor can't rightly say—but he fell, sir, off the step—his head on the stones, and—and—he never—never came to, sir.'

'He is still unconscious!' exclaimed Arthur. 'Oh dear, my poor father! I must go at once. You'—and he glanced round—'you will all excuse me, I am sure.'

He still held my hand and stroked it in a half-mechanical way. I have always liked to remember that.

'Of course, of course,' said Aunt Lucy, who naturally supposed herself to be the principal person addressed; 'but'——

Something made her stop short, as at that moment she caught sight of papa's face. He was looking at her with a strange expression, and when he saw that he had caught her eye he half glanced at Fellows. The poor man was trying to speak.

'Stop, Mr Arthur,' he said at last. 'Sir,' to my father, 'won't you help me? He doesn't understand. Master Arthur'—and in the excitement of his sympathy he laid his hand on my poor boy's shoulder; he had known him since he was only a boy, remember—'it's best for you to know; it'll have to come. I said he *never* came to, sir,—and—and—it is really never. He never will, sir; not in this pitiful world. He's—he's gone, sir.'

Again that terrible whiteness crept all over Arthur's face; we thought he was going to faint. But no; he covered his eyes for an instant, and then he looked up at us all again.

'I must go,' he said, 'at once. Good-bye, dear little Meg.'

My father glanced at our other guests. They understood.

'Yes,' said Sir Thomas, 'of course. Go with him. They may need you.'

He left the room without speaking, and in a few moments we heard the dog-cart drive off again, quite as rapidly as it had come.

Oh dear, what a sad gloom seemed over everything! What a change! But for Morna I really do not know how I should have got through the next few days. I was terribly grieved for my kind friends, and I sorrowed personally for the loss of dear Uncle Glad; but I was very young, and quite new to trouble. It irritated me almost more, I am ashamed to say, than it depressed me. Why should this blow have fallen upon us just when we were so happy? I said to myself. It would not have seemed so sad, not *quite* so hard to bear, if it had come gradually; if we had known it by degrees, and been able to nurse and tend dear Uncle Glad, to soothe and cheer his last steps along the darkening path. But for him to have been *killed*, cut off in this frightfully startling way, it did seem cruel, unnecessary.

Something of this I expressed to Morna a day or two after the blow had fallen. I was feeling miserable and yet cross. I suppose the shock had told on my nerves more than I realised at the first. Morna was very wise, and she had passed through sad times in her young life, for two brothers and a sister of hers

had died three or four years ago, cut off suddenly by some fatal epidemic when in England for their education, as she was herself. She seldom spoke of them, but to-day she told me more than I had yet heard.

'It was dreadful, Meg,' she said, her sweet face growing pale as she spoke. 'You can scarcely believe *how* dreadful, though I was only twelve years old when it happened. The writing to mamma—auntie made me write by the first mail; she said it would be some comfort to her, so I tried to, but I think there were more tears than ink on the paper. I wonder she could read it. Oh, *poor* mamma!'

'Were they older than you?' I asked half timidly, though deeply interested.

'Both,' she replied. 'Lancey was older, and Murray and little Gladys younger. And mamma couldn't come home for a whole year after, and when she did it was like it all happening over again. Oh, it *was* so sad! Mamma said afterwards that that year had seemed to her like the days before the funeral after some one dies, till they are actually taken away—the dear what-*was*-them, you know, Meg; you *can't* believe it. And *she* couldn't, not till she had seen the rooms where she had left us all, and me alone in them.'

'That's a little how I feel about Uncle Glad,' I said eagerly; 'I can't believe it. I would like to go to the Weald to *make* myself know it's true.'

'You will go soon, won't you?' said Morna. 'I am sure Miss Weybridge would like to see you.'

I shook my head. In my heart I was just a little disappointed that Thea had not sent for me. It was not till much later that I found out that my father, in his ultra-care for me, had asked her not to do so till after the funeral. He thought me so sensitive and impressionable, and certainly in these days the outer expressions of feeling at such times were all terribly, wrongly associated with gloom.

'I should have *liked* to go,' I said. 'I should have liked to *see* him, Morna. Arthur says his face looks so sweet and peaceful.'

For Arthur had not forgotten his little girl-friend through all his own absorbing sorrow and trouble. He came over two days after that dreadful evening on purpose to see me, and tell me about his mother and Thea, and how wonderfully 'good' and unmurmuring they were. Unlike me, their first thought was for the one that was gone, not for themselves.

'They are so thankful that he did not, that he *could* not have suffered,' said Arthur. 'It must have been instantaneous. Mother says she cannot regret anything about it; she does not murmur at the awful suddenness or the shock to us, when she thinks what suffering a slow, gradual last illness, which must have come, would have meant, however devoted we all were to him. And she makes me ashamed of myself, Meg, for feeling so fearfully rebellious. When I am with her it seems all different—beautiful even.'

I shook my head as I had done with Morna.

'No,' I said; 'I can't feel like that, and I am sure I never could. To me it seems all wrong and dreadful, even though I know I can't possibly realise what it must be to your mother. But, O Arthur! if it were papa—oh! I *couldn't* bear it.'

Arthur stroked my hand.

'No one knows what one can bear till the need comes, and then the strength comes too,' he said.

Yes, they were all very good, 'dreadfully good,' I knew and felt. But it seemed to make *me* feel still worse. I wanted to go on being happy and light-hearted without interruption. Troubles must come to every one; I knew that was true. But still I did not want to realise that to me myself too come they must.

The day after the funeral papa himself drove me over to the Weald. I had begged to be allowed to wear mourning for a short time, though of a simple kind. And papa was quite pleased for me to do so, in spite of Aunt Lucy's raised eyebrows and half-murmured remarks about its being 'very unusual,' she feared 'people would notice it.'

'And what if they do?' said papa quietly, but with a tone in his voice which at that time I did not understand the full significance of. 'The dear people at the Weald have been more to the child than many relations; indeed, she would have fared badly but for them, as you know, my dear Lucy, you yourself unfortunately being so far from us.'

Aunt Lucy said no more; on the contrary, she was very kind in writing to London for me, to order what I needed. That was her 'way;' she certainly never 'bore malice,' and once she was 'faced' with a certain amount of firmness, she gave in pleasantly enough.

'You look so nice all in black; it suits your hair,' said Morna admiringly the next day when I was waiting for papa to take me to the Weald. 'I do so like the nice bronzy colour of your hair, Meg.'

'It used to be nearly as light as yours,' I said, not ill-pleased at her praise. 'That was when I was quite little. I have never been dressed in mourning before, do you know, Morna?'

'And I have only left it off a little while ago,' said Morna. 'Grandmamma died last year, so when poor mamma comes home there will be somebody missing again.'

'But it must be very nice to have a mother,' I said thoughtfully. 'I can't even remember mine.'

'Didn't you wear black when *she* died?' asked Morna.

'No; I was too little. She said I wasn't to wear anything but white,' I replied.

Just then papa came into the hall. He glanced at me and then at Morna. I suppose he thought we looked very serious, and, no doubt, the seeing me dressed in black for the first time struck him. His face grew anxious.

'What are you talking about, my dear children?' he said.

Morna flushed a little; she seemed almost afraid to reply. I could not bear her to run the risk of any blame.

'Well, we were talking about *rather* sad things, papa,' I said candidly. 'But just now it's only natural. And Morna is so good, papa; she's like Aunt Glad and Thea. I'll never be as good as that, I'm sure.'

Papa smiled, a little sadly, but still it showed Morna that he wasn't at all vexed; and he patted my head as he passed on to the door where the carriage was waiting.

CHAPTER VII.

ANXIETY.

THEA was walking up and down in front of the house as we drove up.

'I was watching for you,' she said gently, and, rather to my surprise, smiling as she spoke.

'How can she?' I thought to myself.

I little understood the power of unselfishness in those days. Thea knew I should feel a little 'strange,' almost constrained, at this first meeting again; and, as ever, she forgot herself in care for others.

'Mamma is in the library, Mr Langholme,' she went on. 'She has some letters she wants to show you. She was so glad when I told her you were coming over this morning. Meggy dear, would you like to stay out a few minutes—it is mild to-day—or shall we go upstairs to my room?'

I was going to say I would like to stay out, but papa, glancing at Thea, interrupted me.

'If I may interfere,' he said, 'I think you had better

go in. You are looking very tired, dear Thea. Make her lie down, Meg, and you sit beside her and talk to her.'

His words made me look at Thea more closely. Yes, it was quite true; she *was* looking very tired and worn. Now that the slight colour which had come to her cheeks on first seeing us had faded, I could not but see that she was very changed. A sudden fear seemed to seize me. I caught her hand as if to save her from the clutch of some approaching evil or danger.

'Come in,' I said; 'come in and rest, darling, and let me take care of you.'

She smiled, but gave in, and together we made our way slowly to the pretty little sitting-room where we had spent so many happy hours, where Thea had taught me so much—more, I am very sure, than she herself had any idea of. And then I made her lie down on the sofa, and sat beside her, holding her hand, till, after a while, to my great delight, she fell quietly asleep. She was all but worn-out, for she had spent the last few nights in her mother's room, watching her, listening to every movement. For poor Mrs Gladwyn had much on her mind besides her grief, and she had found it almost impossible to sleep as yet.

I sat there gazing at Thea—the fair face, the long, black eyelashes and soft, dusky hair, increasing its pallor. She looked terribly delicate.

'If she is going to die too,' I thought to myself, 'I just *won't* bear it. I won't try to bear it;' and two or three great tear-drops crept slowly down my face at the very thought.

I had been wondering what we should talk about this morning—Thea and I. Would she tell me all she had been feeling? or would she rather shrink from the subject? I could not tell, though I felt that it must be for her to decide. And now—now I doubted if we should talk at all. For I could not think of waking her, and she lay there still sleeping quietly—too quietly almost—more experienced eyes than mine would have seen that it was the sleep of utter exhaustion—when, an hour or so later, the door opened gently, and Arthur put his head in. A look of satisfaction crossed his face when he caught sight of his sister.

'Oh Meg, what a good thing!' he said. 'She has been looking so terribly tired. No one but you could have got her to lie down.'

Softly as he spoke, the whispered words, or his presence, roused her. She opened her eyes and held out her hand to me.

'Oh Meggy, Meggy,' she said, 'what manners! Have you mesmerised me, child? Fancy my falling asleep before I had said a word to you'——

I put my hand gently on her mouth.

'You 've to fall asleep again,' I said. 'It 's the best thing you can do. I 'll come again to-morrow. Good-

bye, Thea darling'—for I felt sure Arthur had come up to fetch me—'I mustn't keep papa waiting.'

I stooped to kiss her. She smiled, and murmured something in apology, but she did not attempt to detain me. She was almost asleep again before Arthur had shut the door behind us.

'It's very good of you, Meggy,' he said. 'Thea will be so vexed with herself; but I do believe she is nearly at an end of her strength. Do you really think you can come again to-morrow?'

'I'll try,' I said. 'Morna and the boys are very kind—it's only Aunt Lucy. She may make a little fuss about my leaving them, as they are so soon going away.'

'I understand,' he said. 'Well, of course you must not risk vexing Lady Vyner. But you don't know how much happier I feel now that Thea is really resting.'

I felt happier too; and I wondered that papa still looked grave when I told him about Thea's nice sleep, and asked if I might come again to-morrow—Arthur was so sure that she would begin to get better now if she let herself rest.

'I did feel frightened about her at first,' I allowed; 'she did look horribly tired—just as you said, papa.'

'She has been through too much for her strength,' he replied quietly; and I saw that he was not satisfied.

And the second great sorrow of my childhood *did*

come. Now, looking back through all this distance of years, I see that to me personally it was much more of a trial than the sharp, sudden shock of Uncle Glad's death. Not, of course, in either case, that I would dream of putting my little self in the front rank of those affected by the changed circumstances at the Weald; but they were my *first* sorrows, and it is my own history that I am recalling. And Thea's illness was peculiarly distressing in its rather indefinite character and the long, dragging-on anxiety that accompanies such cases.

The first breath of it came to us the next morning in the guise of a note to me from Arthur, saying that his sister was still so tired, 'so very tired,' she dared not ask me to go over again to-day to see her.

'She slept all night,' he wrote, 'so we hoped she would feel quite bright and refreshed. But she was no sooner up than she begged to go back to bed again, though she said there was nothing the matter with her, and that she was ashamed of her laziness. So I do hope to-morrow may see her quite different, as, alas! I *must* go back to London the day after. I will run over in the afternoon, if I possibly can, to tell you how she is.'

We were still at the breakfast-table when the Weald messenger, the bearer of the note, came. I read it to myself first, and then again aloud, in reply to papa's inquiry as to what was the matter.

'Oh,' said Aunt Lucy airily, 'the poor girl is tired out; she only needs rest.'

'I hope so,' said papa.

But the day passed with no further tidings and no Arthur. And quite late that evening there came another note—to papa this time—which made even Aunt Lucy look grave. It was to say that Thea was no better; violent pains in her head had set in, and the drowsiness was passing off. Dr Holt was perplexed, and was talking already of further advice. So Arthur, furnished with a letter of full details from him, was to see a certain great doctor the next day as soon as he got to London; and in case of the physician in question thinking it advisable that he should see her himself, he was to be asked to come down to the Weald without delay.

'Dear, dear,' said my aunt, 'how unfortunate! And what an expense for them just now!'

Papa left the room. He returned in a moment or two with his great fur-lined overcoat on, buttoned up to his chin.

'I am driving back in the Weald cart,' he said shortly. 'Meg, see that my own follows immediately for me to return in.'

I could see that my aunt's want of tact had jarred on him. I ran after him into the hall.

'Papa,' I whispered hurriedly, 'will you peep into my room for a minute when you come back, just to' —I felt my voice tremble—'to tell me how she is?'

Papa stooped to kiss me.

'Poor little woman!' he said. 'Trouble is coming very near us—*to* us, indeed. But, my darling, it *must* come. Be brave and hopeful. Yes—of course I will look in when I return.'

It was all I could do to keep the tears back. How I did wish the Vyners were gone, and that I might cry in peace, with no fear of Aunt Lucy's well-meant remarks or interference! For the moment I had forgotten Morna. But only for the moment. As I returned to re-enter the drawing room, I saw her standing, framed in the dark doorway, with the lamp-light behind her, touching up her bright, fair hair.

'Meg,' she said, creeping up to me, 'come back for a minute or two, and don't mind anything Aunt Lucy says; and then we can go up to bed—it is quite time—and I may come into your room for a little, mayn't I?'

I gave her a hurried kiss without speaking, and choked down my tears. And for the next ten minutes I controlled myself, so as to answer quietly Aunt Lucy's questions and comments. Had I thought Thea looking very ill yesterday? Had she been growing weaker for some time? That transparent complexion, with a shake of the head, looked like consumption; and so on. But when at last Morna and I escaped, I was glad to be assured by her that I had been most calm and self-controlled.

'I understand so well,' she added. 'If aunty thought you were much upset by it, she would be

putting all sorts of fears into Mr Langholme's head about you.'

'Oh yes,' I agreed. 'He would begin to think of sending me away—to school with you perhaps, Morna; and even with you, dear, I couldn't *bear* school.'

'No,' she replied simply; 'no, I don't think you could.'

Papa had no news to give me when he came into my room an hour or two later. Thea had fallen asleep under the influence of opiates, for the pain in her head had become agonising.

'We must wait to hear what Dr Spender thinks,' he said as he bade me good-night. Dr Spender was the then greatest authority in cases where the nervous system was specially affected.

'Then he will be coming?' I asked.

'Yes,' said papa; 'it was principally to ensure that that I went over there this evening.'

I lay awake for some time. Not only anxiety about Thea was the cause, but I was thinking of what Morna had said. I must do my best not to seem depressed or over-anxious, whatever I felt; for there were still a couple of days before the Vyners would leave, and for some reason, which in those days I could not fathom, I knew that Aunt Lucy would not be sorry to separate me from the Gladwyns.

'If I look dull she is *sure* to persuade papa I must go away,' I thought; 'if not to school, *somewhere*. Perhaps home with them. How *perfectly* miserable I

should be—not even Morna. Oh dear, how I do wish Morna could stay here with me! I should not hear how Thea was, except once every two or three days'—for there were no telegrams then—'she might be'—— but no, I would not put the dreadful idea into words. 'Oh no, I must stay at home, however lonely and sad I feel; it would be better than going away. And I would like to be here for poor Arthur's sake, too; he is sure to come down from London whenever he possibly can. Poor Arthur, how he must hate having to go away from them!'

The next day brought the great doctor's visit, but no diminution of anxiety. He understood the case, I suppose, though medical science has made great strides since those days, but he did not say much to Mrs Gladwyn and papa, who made a point, in Arthur's absence, of being there at the time Dr Spender came, whatever he may have said to our good old Holt. Only one thing they both agreed in—it would be a long, slow illness—a very slow and tedious recovery, if——

'It has been too long brewing to disperse quickly,' said Dr Holt in his quaint way.

Aunt Lucy heard all this, and I *felt* that she was meditating an attack. But forewarned is forearmed, and, thanks to Morna's help, I gave my lady no loophole for it. On the contrary, I overheard her saying to papa, in a slightly aggrieved tone, that, 'after all, Margaret is still quite a child. I do not believe she

has taken in the gravity of poor Miss Weybridge's state at all.'

To which papa replied, in the rather 'dry' tone which he reserved for her ladyship specially, that he 'hoped not.'

I doubt if I did deceive him. I strongly suspect that he understood the part I was, in a sense, playing, and the reason for my doing so, much more accurately than I imagined at the time.

Aunt Lucy was, as I have often said before, truly kind at heart. With the best intentions in the world, she persuaded Uncle Thomas to delay their return home for a day or two, in hopes of some better news from the Weald before leaving us. I was glad to have Morna, of course; but, on the other hand, I longed to be alone with papa, and I felt convinced that far more than a few days must pass before, at the best, our anxiety could diminish.

And this proved to be the case.

'She is no *worse*,' was the most favourable interpretation that even Aunt Lucy's determined optimism (for this was the attitude of mind she had now adopted with regard to Thea) could put upon the report we received the morning of the Vyners' departure, to which I did my best to reply cheerfully.

But as my aunt and cousins and dear little Morna kissed me in farewell, it was very, very difficult to keep back my tears; and as soon as the sound of the carriage-wheels had faded in my ears I ran upstairs to my

own room, locked the door, and flung myself on the bed for a good cry.

'To think,' I said to myself—'to think that it is not a fortnight since they arrived, and we were all so happy.'

But I checked myself suddenly. *Were* we 'all' so happy? Poor Thea — *she* had been suffering for months past, though she had done her best unselfishly to hide it. And now that it had proved too much for *her*, what must not her mother and brother be feeling?

I sat up and wiped my eyes.

'*I* am selfish,' I thought. 'Poor papa is unhappy too. I know it brings back to him the time that mamma died; there was a long time of hoping and fearing, I know. I should try to cheer him, and perhaps, before long, I may be able to do something for *them* too.'

Just then there came a tap at the door. It was my father.

'Meggy dearest,' he said—and it was not very often that papa was so demonstrative—'are you'——

He stopped short as he caught sight of my eyes, which were still red, of course. But how glad I was that I had left off crying!

'Is it because Morna has gone?' he went on.

'No, no,' I said, 'I wouldn't be so silly, for I know I shall see her again before long. No, papa dear; it is about—about Thea and *them*. But I am not going to cry any more; I am not, really.'

He took my hand and stroked it.

'That is right,' he said. 'But, dear child, I must think of you too. You are very young, and all this trouble of our friends is hard upon you. I think, perhaps'——

I put my hands over his mouth before he could say more.

'Oh, Aunt Lucy, Aunt Lucy!' I exclaimed.

And actually papa could not help laughing a little.

'No,' he replied, 'it was *not* Aunt Lucy this time; it is I myself. I can't have you fretting yourself ill, Meg.'

'Oh papa!' I said reproachfully, 'I am *not* going to be like that. I really mean to be unselfish—and hopeful—we *may* be hopeful, mayn't we?'

'It is always wrong to give up hope—till it is plainly taken from us,' he said; 'and, thank God, that is not yet so in this case. Well then, Meg, I will trust you. You will do your best, for *my* sake, for their sakes. You will have to be very patient as well as hopeful; it may go on a long time like this.'

'I know,' I said resignedly. 'Papa,' I went on, 'do you think I might go over myself to the Weald this afternoon? Perhaps Auntie Glad might like to see me?'

'Yes,' he replied; 'I am sure you will be self-controlled. Yes, you may drive yourself over in your pony-carriage and ask if Mrs Gladwyn *would* like to see you. At any rate you will get the

latest report, and you might send it yourself to poor Arthur.'

I was pleased at the idea, and from that day for some weeks it became my daily habit to drive or walk over to the Weald. Sometimes I saw Thea's mother, sometimes not. But at worst I heard the exact state of things for myself, which is always a satisfaction. I think the experience of those weeks was very good for me; it was excellent discipline for the impatience which was one of the weakest points of my character.

One afternoon, about a week after the Vyners' departure, I was driving home rather hurriedly—for I had stayed longer than usual at the Weald, talking to poor Mrs Gladwyn, and receiving her instructions for one or two letters she had asked me to write for her—when suddenly, at a turn in the road, a tall, dark figure emerged from the gloom of the hedge and stood, a little in front, as if intending to stop me.

I was not alarmed—not, that is to say, at first. It had never occurred to me to be afraid of anything or any one on our own roads, where I knew by sight everybody I met. And 'tramps' were much fewer in those days than now. Still, there *were* such beings, and it was almost dark. I began to wish I had brought the boy-groom with me; but I had often and often driven over to the Weald alone, and even papa thought it quite safe. My heart, however, did begin to beat rather faster than usual when I noticed that

A tall, dark figure emerged from the gloom of the hedge . . . as if intending to stop me.

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the man, whoever he was, remained standing, evidently with some intention in his mind.

I determined to rouse up the pony and pass him as quickly as possible, but just as I was raising my whip with this idea, a voice, deep and rather gruff, startled me, for a moment or two, still more. Then I recognised it, with considerable relief—it and its owner. He was Philip Blunt.

'If you please, miss,' he began, and then I think he must have caught sight of my pale face—'beg your pardon,' he added hurriedly, 'I didn't mean for to startle you'——

'Never mind,' I said, a little ashamed of myself. 'What is it you were going to ask me?'

'It was to know how the poor young lady is—Mr Arthur's sister,' he replied, more gently than I had ever heard him speak. 'They do talk so backwards and forwards about her—there's no knowing what's the truth.'

'She is going on pretty well,' I said. 'She is not worse, and I suppose as yet she scarcely *could* be really better. They say that, if her strength keeps up, by the end of next week or so there should be a turn for good. I suppose that's all they can say;' and I could not help sighing. It sounded worse when put into plain words.

'Thank you, miss,' said the young man, lifting his hand to his head in momentary forgetfulness that he was already uncovered, and then, in embarrassment,

twirling the cap about awkwardly; 'thank you, miss.'

But though he was standing in my way, he did not step aside. There was evidently something more he wanted to say. So, for Arthur's sake, I waited, though I was really anxious to get home, fearing papa would be uneasy, and Phil Blunt being at no time a special favourite of mine.

He spoke at last.

'It's—it's Mr Arthur, miss,' he said. 'I'm that sorry for him to be so put about, and I can't take it on me to trouble him. But would you tell him something from me, miss? It'd be very kind. I'm not much of a scholar, and I don't know his place in London, and I don't want to trouble him. And I never can see him now when he comes down; it's just for a night and off again, they say.'

'He has only been home twice since his sister got ill,' I said. 'Yes, it's very sad for him;' for I did not want to add to all poor Arthur's worries by teasing him about Phil Blunt. 'But'—my conscience pricking me a little, or something in the young fellow's appealing face touching me—'I do write to him nearly every day, and I can give him a message from you.'

He gave a short sigh of relief.

'Thank you, miss,' he said again. 'It's just this: Will you please tell him I can't stand it no longer?—he'll know what I mean: my life here and all about it—and I'm off? But I sort of promised him, you see,

to do nothing rash-like, and to tell him first. That was before he had all these troubles. So I don't want him to think I've forgot, nor that I'd be off on the sly without telling him.'

I began to feel more interested and concerned.

'Where do you think of going to?' I asked.

He hesitated. 'I can't rightly say,' he replied. 'I was thinking of goin' to the sea, to some port, first, and just takin' whatever turned up.'

'Do you want to go to America?' I inquired.

He started and muttered something; then he recollected himself.

'The last place as I'd go to,' he said gruffly.

And I remembered that the objectionable Jeremy was supposed to be in America; and, with Phil's very vague ideas of geography, he probably thought the first person he would meet on the other side of the Atlantic would be his cousin.

'Does your father know what you are thinking of?' I said gently.

Phil's tone softened as he replied.

'He knows as it's comin' to that,' he said. 'He's not against it; it'd be best for me, and he thinks so too. But I've not told him as I'm meaning it just yet a while. I've told no one but you, miss, for Mr Arthur, you see.'

'I won't talk about it, except to him,' I said, touched by his trust in me. 'But you must promise *me* something, Phil. If I write about you to Mr Arthur, will

you, on your side, promise me to do nothing—not to go away, and not to *fix* anything, till I get his answer?'

Phil hesitated. 'It'd seem like as if I looked for him to help me after all,' he said at last.

I was pleased by the delicacy of feeling underlying his roughness.

'No,' I said; 'not if I explain that I *made* you promise it. And, on the other hand, don't you see that if you went off, or settled something, without his advice, it might look rather ungrateful?'

The word caught him sharply.

'Well, yes,' he said humbly.

'All right, then,' I replied, 'it's a bargain. Good-evening, Phil;' and, scarcely knowing why I did so, I held out my hand.

He shook it, half timidly and yet heartily. I little thought then what might come of my having gained what I now believe I did gain that night of Philip Blunt's queer, undisciplined, but faithful heart.

I wrote about him to Arthur that very evening. And, after all, it was rather a relief to have something of interest to tell him, as well as the sadly monotonous report of my daily visit to the Weald. In a postscript I added a suggestion as to putting the matter into my father's hands.

'You are so busy and worried just now,' I said, 'and I know papa would be only too ready to do anything to help him, for old Mathew's sake, if not for his own.'

But Arthur's reply, which came as soon as was possible, negatived this.

'Thank you so much,' he wrote, 'for your kindness to Phil Blunt.' That was like Arthur; for, after all, it was rather our place—papa's and mine—to thank *him* for his kindness to one of our own people. 'I blame myself for not having made a point of seeing him or writing to him before this. But I was in hopes things were better with him, and that any change for him might wait a while. Please let him know that this week I hope to get down from Saturday to Monday, and will see him. No; do not speak of him at present to Mr Langholme. I want to find out first what is the matter now; and he is too sore and mortified still to be frank and unconstrained with your father.'

Arthur did see him the following Sunday. He told me so, though without entering fully into details as to what had passed between them. He told me, too, that he was arranging for Philip to leave the neighbourhood, if not the country, very shortly.

'I had not forgotten him,' he said, 'and I think I have found a good opening for him as under-gardener; in fact, two chances have come in my way for him, through one of the men in our office, either of which might do.'

'Are you not going to tell papa about his going away?' I asked.

'Of course I shall. Your father understands the

whole thing so well that he wishes me to act to some extent instead of himself,' Arthur replied.

'But what is all the fuss about?' I inquired, with a touch of my former impatience. 'Is it simply that you are afraid of his getting to be a drunkard? I don't see that going away from his own house, where he has a good father and sisters, is likely to cure him.'

'I'm not afraid of his drinking once he feels himself started fresh,' was the reply. 'He has no natural weakness of the kind. I don't think he has been the least the worse for drink for many months past. And there is no real mystery about his troubles, though I am not free to tell all he has told me. It is just that, under that fellow's influence and misrepresentations, the foolish boy put himself more or less in the power of a clique of idle, worthless fellows — a kind of "Captain Swing" band, I fancy.'

'Who is Captain Swing?' I inquired.

Arthur smiled.

'*What* is "Captain Swing" rather,' he replied. 'Did you never hear of the riots and rows that went on in several parts of the country some years ago? My father has often spoken of them. He always took the greatest interest, you know, in the grievances of the poor, though he was not a landed proprietor, or of position enough to do much for their redress. And of course there are and were only too many real grievances. But it is the noisy, idle lot who make most clatter about them. "Captain Swing" was not a man,

but the name of one of these would-be revolutionary bands. That Jeremy started a sort of league about here, to defend poachers and all that kind of thing; and Phil, stupid fellow, joined them. He has tried to get out of it, but it is difficult. They threaten him, though he is no coward; and I suspect they try to blackmail him, for there is no doubt he was mixed up in some ugly things—rick-burning, and so on. Yes, it is best for him to get clear away. It is a case of a dog with a bad name for him now, to a great extent.'

This was the only conversation we had at that time on the subject; but it cleared up what had puzzled me, and increased my pity for Phil.

I was glad to hear, not long afterwards, that he had gone, though where I was not told. I believe it was considered best to keep his destination secret.

CHAPTER VIII.

PLEASANT NEWS.

AT last—after many, many days, it seemed to me, and doubtless still more to those most nearly concerned — came the good turn hoped for by the doctors, and we knew that Althea was 'to live and not die.'

But *how* she would be; *what* of her former healthy, happy temperament would be restored; in how far youth would assert itself; or if the Thea of the future would be but a gentle invalid, aged and broken-down before she had reached her prime—all these questions only time could answer.

Winter was already on the wane, and we had had some cheering signs of an early spring, before I saw her again. For I know I had a tiny basketful of snowdrops, and one or two 'pale,' very pale, primroses, and even a wee bunch of violets from a sheltered corner of our garden reserved for them, in my hand when I crept half timidly into her room that afternoon.

She was still in bed, and after all not, at the first glance, so very changed. Her beautiful long black hair had been cut off, but it was wavy about the temples, and this made her face look less thin. And her cheeks were pink.

She held out her hands without speaking; and as I stooped down to kiss her I choked back a catch in my throat. I had promised to be very calm and quiet.

Then she said, almost in a whisper:

'My darling Meg, the seeing you makes it feel *real* to me—the getting better, I mean.'

'Yes,' I said; 'and not only getting better—getting quite well, Thea.'

'Yes,' she repeated, rather to my surprise, 'I do mean to get *quite well*. I am going to begin again, as it were—a sort of fresh life. I have thought about it all so much lying here, even when I did not think I *was* going to get better. The agony of seeing mamma's sad face, and, still worse, the pitiful way she and Artie forced themselves to smile, made me see how selfish I had been in letting my own troubles sink so deep, that when papa's death came I had not strength to bear up and help them. So then I resolved, Meg, firmly resolved, that if I lived I would try to get *well*—really well and strong, for their sake.'

'And do say, a tiny bit for *mine*,' I could not resist putting in.

'Yes, a good big bit for yours, if it isn't conceited to think I may be of use to you too, my dear little Meg,' she replied.

I was afraid she was tiring herself. I glanced at the clock. I was only to stay ten minutes. She understood.

'No,' she said, smiling, 'I am not tiring myself. I put off seeing you for a few days—I might have seen you for a minute last week — because I wanted to be looking a little better and to be able to say all this to you. You are the best person for me to say it to, Meg. I want you to *remind* me, if ever you think I am forgetting it, of this sort of vow I am making—to do all I can to get and keep strong for the sake of others. Will you, dear?'

'Yes,' I said firmly, 'I will; though I don't believe you will ever need reminding.'

'I may do,' she replied. 'And I want to think over every possible way of ensuring the getting quite strong, without adding to mamma's and Artie's burdens. You like making plans, Meggy—I wish you would make some for me.'

'I'll try,' I said; and already various ideas began to chase each other round my busy little brain.

'Thank you, dear,' she said. 'It will give us something amusing to talk about when you come to see me. When will that be?'

'The day after to-morrow,' I replied. '*To-morrow*, Auntie Glad says, the London doctor is coming to

see you again, so she asked me to wait till Thursday, and'—— I hesitated.

'And what?' said Thea, smiling.

I smiled too.

'I *believe*,' I said, 'your mother wanted to see if I had tired you, before she risked it for longer. So I had better go now, dear Thea; and I shall think a lot about what you have said to me.'

Her colour had faded by this time, and I began to see the sad traces of her long illness more clearly. But her eyes looked bright and full of life, and there was a sort of strength and resolution about her altogether which I had never observed so much in Thea before. Nor was this new phase in her character imaginary. She had been through the fire, and had come out not only purified—to all of us who knew her that would have seemed almost impossible—but strengthened.

I told papa all about our talk. She had not forbidden me to do so, and I knew how keenly and practically interested he would be in any plan for helping our friends.

'Are they much less well off than they used to be, papa?' I inquired, for some of Aunt Lucy's remarks had recurred to my mind.

'I fear so,' he replied, 'or rather I *know* they are, as Mrs Gladwyn has done me the honour of consulting me about her business matters. It isn't anything desperate,' he added quickly, for I suppose my face

grew very sad. 'I earnestly hope they will not have to leave the Weald. But just now, before things are settled, it is certainly very difficult for them to meet any more extra expenses; those of the illness itself must have been very heavy.'

'What do you mean by extra expenses besides those of the illness?' I asked.

'Oh,' said papa, 'I was thinking of a change of air for Thea, and for her mother too. Mrs Gladwyn must need it almost as much.'

'Papa,' I said, 'we are rich, aren't we? At least, I mean, you are?'

'Scarcely *rich*,' he replied, 'though quite and well able to help our friends if only they would let us.'

'And don't you think they would?' I said.

He shook his head.

'I have been considering about it already,' he replied. 'No; I see no possible way of suggesting such a thing; and even less now that Thea has confided in you, and asked you to help her to plan how to get quite strong again.'

'Yes,' I agreed; 'I almost wish she hadn't. I wonder what she was thinking of that I could help her to plan. Going away for a change is always the first thing doctors propose. Perhaps Mrs Gladwyn hasn't told her about their having less money, papa.'

'Possibly not; but I fancy Thea has always known it would be so in case of her step-father's death.'

'Or perhaps,' I went on, 'she was thinking she might go away somewhere by herself, to stay with some of her relations, which wouldn't cost so much. And then we might ask Auntie Glad to come and stay with us; or I might go to stay with her, to prevent her feeling lonely. Yes, I dare say Thea has something like that in her head.'

'I should be delighted to have Mrs Gladwyn here for as long as she could stay,' said papa. 'I should like that far better than your deserting *me*. *I* should be very lonely in that case. But I am afraid it would never do for Thea to go away without her mother, so weakened as she is. I must try to hit upon some way of managing it.'

'I think *I* had better get ill—just a little; nicely ill, you know—and you be too busy to go away with me, and then we could ask them as a favour to take me somewhere,' I said laughingly.

'They would see through it, I 'm afraid,' papa replied. 'If Arthur were at home it might be more easily managed.'

'Yes,' I agreed. 'We seem always to want Arthur when there is anything to be settled, don't we? I do wish he were my brother, papa.'

'Do you? I scarcely think I do,' he said. 'I am quite content with my daughter, and'——

But he stopped abruptly, and I could not get him to finish his sentence.

I went over to the Weald the next day but one, as

arranged, and, to my great pleasure, I found Thea promoted to the sofa, and feeling — so she assured me—'ever so much better.'

'Dr Spender was quite satisfied with me this time,' she said. 'He says all I have to do now is to get *quite* well — just what I had already determined to do, as I told him.'

'But you won't get quite well by lying here, I'm afraid,' I said. 'Did he not give you any advice as to *how* to do it?'

I wanted to lead round to the question of change of air and scene for her. In spite of what papa had said, I could not help thinking that we might somehow manage to persuade Mrs Gladwyn to let us—papa, rather—be of use, without hurting their sensitiveness.

Thea looked up quickly.

'Yes,' she said, 'he wants me to go away very soon. I was going to tell you so, and to ask you if *possibly* Mr Langholme would let you come over here to keep poor mamma company for a week or two while I go to one of my aunts; but'——

'That was just what *I* was thinking of!' I exclaimed; 'and I said so to papa. But *he* said it would be much better if Auntie Glad came to us; only, he thinks, and so do I, Thea, that she needs a good change of air almost as much as you do.'

'I know,' said Thea; but, to my surprise, her tone was not at all depressed. 'I am sure she does; and yesterday, after the doctor had gone, I was, to tell

you the truth, feeling rather miserable about it, from something *he* said. But—I am sure you will be pleased, Meggy—quite a wonderful thing has happened this morning. It really did seem as if some good fairy had interfered. This very morning there came a letter to mamma from '—she hesitated a moment, then went on resolutely—'from that dear, funny-looking old man you saw here once—you remember?—Uncle Peter—I must call him "uncle," though he is really no relation of mine. Well, he had heard of my illness, and he sent mamma a cheque, a good big cheque, Meg, to use for our going away, wherever we like, for a good long change. He *begs* mamma not to think him interfering, and he makes out that we shall be granting him the greatest favour by doing as he asks. I can't tell you how nicely he puts it. Isn't it sweet of him? Of course, for *mamma's* sake, if not for my own, I could not possibly refuse it.'

Her eyes looked quite bright and eager. In those days there was much more excitement about a change, even to some seaside or watering place, than people feel *now* about going to the Antipodes; and one side of me was glad to see Thea's pleasure, but the other side was very disappointed. I had set my heart, almost unconsciously, on being the fairy godmother in the case, and now it was all taken out of my hands by that tiresome, meddling old man!

Thea saw my change of expression at once, and her own face fell a little.

'Aren't you pleased, Meggy?' she said. 'I asked mamma to let me tell you; I thought you would be so glad.'

'I *am* glad of anything that pleases you,' I said. 'But—I can't feel, for myself, glad to think of you going away for perhaps a long while. I was wondering if we couldn't have planned all to go away together. I am sure papa would be quite ready to arrange anything like that if I told him *I* wanted a change. And I believe I do. I have been very dull and unhappy while you were ill.'

Thea took hold of my hand and stroked it.

'I know you have, dear,' she said; 'but I don't think it would be very good for you to go away with me as I am just now. I want you to forget about illnesses and anxieties. I am only too sorry when I think how much trouble your affection for us has brought you of late.'

'But people can't go through the world without troubles and sorrows,' I said.

'N-no; but—you are so young, Meggy dear. But I am going to get well and strong, and then I shall try to make up to you for it all. You will see how different I shall look when we come back from Eastbourne, or Ventnor, or wherever we fix to go. I wish Mr Langholme could take you somewhere while we are away. It will not be for very long.'

'I don't think I want to go,' I said. 'Next to you, there is no one I care to be with except Morna Sweyn,

and she 's at school. Oh Thea, I should so have liked to have planned all going somewhere together!'

But Thea, for all her gentleness, could be firm, very firm. I am sure she thought it would *not* be good for me; and, besides this, she perhaps suspected papa's wish and mine to help in some practical way; though, of course, this was no longer necessary.

'Is old Mr Gladwyn very rich?' I asked, after a little pause.

'Oh dear, no,' said Thea; 'that is the beauty of it. If he were very rich it would be kind, quite unusually kind—for I can't help noticing that it is not the richest people who think of kindnesses like that the most frequently—but it wouldn't be the same thing as a comparatively poor man's doing it. No one knows much about Uncle Peter's affairs, mother says, and—we strongly suspect he has had a lot of trouble with his cousin.'

'His cousin?' I repeated, stupidly enough.

'Yes,' said Thea; 'Roland Gladwyn is his cousin.'

I felt vexed with myself, but Thea's voice did not falter in the least as she pronounced his name, nor did her colour rise, and I saw that this was one of the directions in which she had determined to begin afresh.

When I went home I, of course, told papa the news I had heard. He was, unselfishly, glad of it, but I think he too shared a little my wish that *we* could have acted the *deus ex machina* in the matter.

Ten days later Mrs Gladwyn and Thea left for—as far as I now remember—the Isle of Wight, with the intention of remaining there till the milder weather had fairly set in, which it gave promise of doing early that year, so that by May or thereabouts we might hope to see our friends at home again.

But even a few weeks seem a long time when one is as young as I then was. I could not help feeling very dull and depressed that afternoon as I sat by myself in my pretty little room, too much out of spirits to play, or read, or draw.

'After all,' I thought, 'it is rather horrid to be an only child, especially when one has no mother, and when one's father is always out and busy.'

I began to feel very sorry for myself. It was a dull day, and, like more people than are willing to own to it, I have all my life been extremely sensitive to the influences of weather. It is a weak point in my nature which I have often had to do severe battle with.

Suddenly a sound caught my ears. A firm step was coming along the passage towards my room. I jumped up, trying hastily to obliterate the traces of tears in my eyes, for I was sure it was papa; and so it was. In another moment the door opened and in he came.

I need not have hoped to deceive him. His kind, keen eyes took it all in at a glance. He sat down beside me, and put his arm round me tenderly.

'My poor little woman,' he said, 'did you think your careless old dad had forgotten about you, and that he was going to leave you all alone?'

I felt ashamed of myself, and kissed the hand on my shoulder by way of tacit apology for my want of trust in him. He understood.

'Cheer up, Meg,' he went on; 'you are going to be busy enough. What should you say to a visit to London with me? You have never been there, and it would suit me very well to pitch our tent in town for a few weeks just now, as there are some county matters coming before the House which I have to give information about. And you could have some good lessons—music, drawing, foreign languages—whatever you like. Can you be ready by the day after to-morrow?'

'Oh papa!' I gasped, my breath nearly taken away by the wonderful prospect; 'oh, *dear* papa! I can't imagine anything I should like as much just now. Be ready! Of course I can be ready; and it *would* be nice to choose the new clothes I need this spring myself, instead of writing for patterns and having them made up by Mrs Prim at Bray.'

'All right,' said papa. 'Ring for Wellman'—Wellman was my maid—'and set to work at your packing at once.'

'Will Wellman go with us?' I inquired.

'Certainly; it is not a mere run up for a day or two. If you are happy and can manage to enjoy

yourself, even though your old dad may have to leave you to your own devices now and then, we may stay several weeks. I have written for rooms in a very comfortable private hotel near my club, and I have heard of a French lady, who gives lessons in London, who will come every day to read and talk French with you and to walk out with you. So, between her and Wellman, you will be well looked after.'

I gave a deep sigh of satisfaction.

'I can scarcely believe it, papa,' I said; 'and I am very glad you don't want to take Miss Parton with us. She would be quite stupid in London.' Miss Parton was my daily governess, a very fair teacher as teaching went in those days, but not a highly educated or specially intelligent woman, though a worthy soul. 'But,' I went on, as a more unselfish thought struck me, 'won't she be sorry not to give me lessons for so long, papa?'

'I have arranged all that. She is delighted to have a holiday, as she wants to go to stay with her brother,' said papa; which set my mind quite at rest, as I knew well how kind and considerate in all such 'arrangements' papa was sure to be.

So I felt free to give myself up to the enjoyment of this wonderful news. As I ran along the passage to my bedroom I could scarcely believe myself to be the same child who had sat crying quietly, *very* sorry for herself, on the window-seat half-an-hour ago, staring

out on the dull, rainy afternoon scene, with a general sensation of grayness everywhere!

And Wellman was almost as excited and delighted as I myself. She had never been in London—'not to stay,' as she expressed it, though she was my superior in so far that she had once spent a night there, when in the service of her 'last lady,' a good many years ago now; and we decided that I was to do my best to learn my way about when under the French lady's charge, so that afterwards Wellman and I could set off on private expeditions of our own.

'And of course, miss, London isn't like the country. There 's always policemen about as you can ask your way of, if you did lose it, not to speak of respectable shops in plenty.'

We set to work at our packing immediately, though I rather think all we did that afternoon had to be undone again the next morning, as we were both too excited to be very clear-headed as to what should be taken and what left behind. But, after all, it was just as well that all the preparations took twice as long as they need have done, for otherwise I really don't know how I should have managed to pass the time till the hour for starting arrived, so restless and eager to be off did I feel! For, remember, I had never been in London in my life!

I ran down to say good-bye to 'Tilda Drew that last evening. My feelings towards the old woman had become rather complicated. I had a real affection for

her, and she deserved it, for she was most faithful and devoted to my father and myself. But ever since the afternoon when she had, unintentionally no doubt, damped my spirits by her rather gloomy talk, I had come to feel a little afraid of her; not from any doubt of her attachment to us, but from a strange idea that there was a touch of the uncanny about her. For her prognostications, or warnings, had been, to some extent, justified.

She was aging rapidly, but her mind and perceptions seemed to grow keener as her physical strength failed. Her eyes were very bright and clear, her thin white face curiously refined and almost ethereal-looking. She had been a pretty, almost a beautiful woman in her best days, papa told me, though he himself could not remember her in her prime.

She welcomed me eagerly as usual, getting up from her arm-chair in the corner to dust the already irreproachably clean settle, which was my usual seat. For she herself and her cottage were always exquisitely clean, the habits of neatness and carefulness she had acquired in her long years of 'service' never having deserted her.

'Well, 'Tilda,' I said, 'you 've heard the news? I 've been very busy all day, but I did not like to go away without bidding you good-bye.'

'And very kind of you it is, missie, to think of a poor old woman like me. And pleased I am to see

you before you start. I shall miss you sorely when you 're gone, missie.'

'Oh, but it isn't for so very long,' I rejoined hastily. I was half afraid of any gloomy warnings, though I need not have been.

'No, to be sure,' she replied. 'But one can't go for to say much as to long or short when one comes to my age, and '——

'Now, 'Tilda,' I interrupted in a tone of real annoyance, 'you 're not to begin frightening me again about what may happen, and all that sort of talk. Papa wouldn't let me come to see you if he thought you talked that way.'

The poor woman looked sadly distressed.

'Dear, dear missie,' she exclaimed, clasping her hands, 'don't say that! To be sure, I told you about the night-rider, and that was maybe foolish of me. But you 'd heard it before, and you asked me about it yourself, didn't you now, missie dear?'

'Oh, I don't mind about that,' I said, 'and I know I did ask you. I 've known something about it for a long time. No, it isn't that; it was before last Christmas that something you said frightened me;' and I reminded her of it. 'I couldn't get it out of my head, even though everything went right up to Christmas. And the troubles did come, you know, 'Tilda—the troubles at the Weald, I mean—and they were nearly as bad as if they had been our own.'

'To be sure they were,' she replied, 'and my old

heart ached for you all, dear love—for you and the squire, as well as for poor Mr Arthur and the ladies. And glad I am that you are going to have a nice change to London. I was there once, missie, for a week, and I've never forgot it. And you'll be seeing Mr Arthur; that'll cheer him up nicely.'

'Yes, of course we shall,' I said; though, to tell the truth, in the midst of my preparations I had forgotten this additional pleasure. 'Oh yes, I'm awfully pleased to go. But if you have had any warnings, 'Tilda, you'd better tell me. I feel now as if you were hiding something.'

The old woman leaned forward in her chair, and clasped both my hands in hers, while her dark eyes looked earnestly into mine.

'No, missie dear,' she said, 'there's nought on my mind that need trouble you now, nor for many a day to come. I was only going to say that my old eyes will maybe not live to see you again, and there's nought in that to make you sad. It's God's way and Nature's way. No, missie, it's in my mind that you'll have a happy time, and pleased I am to think so.'

'Thank you, dear 'Tilda,' I said, considerably relieved, to tell the truth. But my hands were still in the old dame's clasp, and her eyes still gazed at me. 'What is it?' I said half querulously. 'I can feel you've something to say still;' and her phrase, 'not for many a day to come,' recurred to me uncomfortably.

'It's nought to trouble you now, but I'm bound to

say it,' she said, and her voice took a distressed tone, while her eyes, suddenly quitting my face, gazed out of the little casement window as if they saw far, far away. 'Don't forget it, my sweet lady. You 'll hear him twice. The second time there 'll be but one thing to do—to bow the head and say, "Thy will be done." But that 's far off, very far off you yet; and such, miss, must come to all. It 's the first time I 'm wanting you to remember, for that 'll be a warning you can take for good.'

'What do you mean, 'Tilda?' I said, trembling in spite of myself.

She shook her head sadly.

'I wish I could say; I wish I could say!' she murmured; 'but more isn't given to me. It 's only this: take warning, my sweet missie; the first time—and even that won't be for long—the first time you hear the night-rider, know there 's some danger threatening you; so stay by your father's side, and maybe it 'll pass you by. That 's all—all I know.'

I could not be vexed with her, impressed though I was; she was so pitifully in earnest.

'Well,' I said, trying to speak lightly, 'I won't forget, though I hope I shall never hear the ghost again. I don't want to, I 'm sure. And the worst of it is, you see, 'Tilda, now you 've put it in my head, I may *fancy* it and get frightened for nothing.'

'No,' she said quietly, 'you won't fancy it, my dear. And there 's no need for you to think of my poor

words before the time. They 'll come back to you when the need is there; only don't forget *then* what I 've said; take heed and stay by your father's side.'

Then she leant back in her chair as if half exhausted, and gradually the strained look left her eyes. She murmured something I could not catch.

'What are you saying, 'Tilda?' I asked.

'Only "God bless her,"' she answered, with a slight smile, '"and don't let her forget."'

'There 's not much fear of my forgetting,' I said, 'with you here to remind me, however long the time is of coming.'

'But if I 'm not here, missie darling?'

'Oh, nonsense!' I replied. 'You 'll stay just as you are for ever so long. But I 'm going to forget all your warnings for the present; I want to enjoy myself.'

'And so you will,' she answered. 'There 's no need for you to think on what I 've said till it 's sent back to your mind, and there 's many a bright day for you 'twixt now and then.'

'Well, that 's a good thing any way,' I said lightly, in my heart convinced that my old friend's brain was somewhat dazed with years, and that I need pay no attention to what she said. 'By-the-bye,' I went on as I rose to go, 'do you ever hear anything of Phil Blunt from his people next door? I meant to have asked Mr Arthur about him, but I forgot.'

Dame Drew brightened up at this, and replied quite cheerfully, in her ordinary practical way, that the

Blunts had very good news of Philip; he was doing well and feeling very content.

'Where is he?' I said carelessly.

'And that I can't say, miss,' she replied. 'It's a long way off, but I've never heard the name, and I fancy it's best not to know it. There's those as might worrit the poor boy still, if they knew where he was.'

'Oh yes, I understand,' I said; 'but I'm very glad he's getting on well.'

'Tilda nodded her head.

'That was a good day's work we did, missie' she said, with considerable self-congratulation—'you and I, and Mr Arthur, bless him.'

And it was with these cheerful words on her lips that I left her. But she was right in her half-expressed instinct of farewell. I never saw her again.

CHAPTER IX.

NEW SCENES.

OLD 'Tilda was right, too, in another of her predictions. The very happy time she had promised me came to pass.

I shall never forget the fascination and delight of that first visit to London. Everything interested, everything pleased me; even places and incidents of which one would be at a loss to define the charm I found full of gratification. More than once, for instance, I accompanied my father when county or private business took him to the City, waiting outside the offices he called at, in the depths of a ponderous four-wheeler: it was before the days of hansoms. And though he came out often very self-reproachful for having left me so long, he never found me tired or dull.

'It is all so interesting,' I would say. I like to watch the faces of the people passing, or the great drays with their loads. The mysterious-looking vans, and now and then a coach starting on its journey with

sounding horn, all attracted me; even the 'gamins' of the streets, human or feathered, were a source of the greatest amusement to me. The very gloom and grimness of some of the rows of houses standing where there was little traffic or no thoroughfare at all I found fascinating and suggestive. No doubt the complete novelty of it all was the principal factor in my enjoyment, for I had never before been in any large town. And nowadays, when everybody, young and old, go and have been everywhere, it often strikes me that the positive loss of enjoyment thus brought about — honest, simple enjoyment — to the former especially, is much under-estimated. For I am slow to believe that 'original' nature changes much; boys and girls would be just as eager and keen to appreciate the interest and charm of much that they now pass by as dull and matter-of-course if they were less overloaded, from their infancy even, with excitement and entertainment in every shape.

There is always, I suppose, the other side of the medal.

Now and then, in these drives, my father would stop at some recognised object of interest, some time-honoured 'lion.' In this way I saw, under intelligent guidance, several of the oldest, in some cases rarely-visited city churches, as well as the regular 'sights' of old London.

And other treats, of the orthodox description, the same kind thought planned for me. I was taken to

the play several times; I saw Madame Tussaud's, the Zoo, the picture galleries, and some other sights of which the name only, and scarcely that in some instances, remains to the present day. To several of these Arthur was my conductor, for he spent his Saturdays and Sundays with us, excepting on one or two occasions when he went down to Eastbourne to see his mother and sister, of whom we received steadily improving good accounts.

Then I had my lessons, too. The French lady turned out a great success. It was the first time I had had a chance of talking the language with a native, and I hope—nay, I feel sure I profited by this as well as by her other instruction. For I have often been told that my accent is good, and this, I think, is rarely, if ever, the case with any one who only practises French conversation later in life. I worked at my piano too, though without any very brilliant result; for, while genuinely fond of good music, I had not talent enough to do great things as a performer. But in those days—dear me, how constantly I seem to be using the expression!—in those days a 'little' playing was not despised as it is now, too much, I sometimes think. For a modest amount of skill as a pianoforte player may often give pleasure in the home circle, soothe an invalid, or delight a child, even if nothing more. No, I cannot quite give in my adhesion to the modern dictum, that unless one can rival a professional, it is better to leave music alone.

It was all very happy—very, very happy. I love to look back upon those months. For our stay in London grew into months. It was nearly June before my father decided to leave.

Several things had conspired to this. The spring was an unusually late one; there were cold winds at home, which made Dr Holt write to advise Mrs Gladwyn not to bring Thea home till the summer had really set in. And so we could have been of no use to our friends at the Weald if we had been at Holme Alders, and it would have been dull and lonely for me, while in London I was both thoroughly enjoying myself and profiting by my lessons.

But the last week of May brought two letters which decided our plans. One was from Thea, announcing their return to the Weald about the middle of June; the other was from Aunt Lucy, begging us to take them *en passant* on our way home.

'Rather a figure of speech,' said papa, with a smile, as he read the letter aloud to me. 'I don't see how your aunt can make out that Vyners Court is on our way home. It means something like travelling along two sides of a triangle instead of one. However, she writes very kindly, and you have not been there for a long time.'

'Never that I can properly remember,' I said. 'I was a *very* little girl the Christmas we spent there, papa. But I don't care very much about going there, unless, of course, you would like it?'

Papa did not at once reply. He was reading a postscript on the other side of the page which had at first escaped his attention.

'Oh!' he exclaimed, '*this* will make you care to go, Meg—this postscript;' and he read on: '"I forgot to say that Morna will be with us next week for her summer holidays—a fortnight earlier than usual"' (though in those days school terms were differently divided, the midsummer holidays often beginning about the twentieth of June), '"but there has been an alarm of measles at the school, and they are breaking up sooner on that account. Morna has had measles, so is safe; and so has dear Margaret, I remember. You will not have any fear of infection, therefore."'

'*Morna* there!' I cried joyfully. 'Oh yes, of course, papa, that makes all the difference in the world. Oh yes; if it lengthened the journey half-a-dozen times over I wouldn't mind. Indeed, I love travelling. You will go; you will write and accept, won't you?'

Papa looked very pleased. How he did love to see me happy!

'Yes, my little woman,' he said, 'certainly I will.'

And that day week saw us arrive, in excellent spirits, though a little tired with the long, dusty journey—for the heat had come suddenly at last—at Vyners Court.

It was a large and rather stately place, in every

way much more imposing than our own comparatively small home, but, to my mind, far less lovable and cosy. Still, it was a thoroughly comfortable house to stay at; excellently well managed, as anything belonging to Aunt Lucy was sure to be; and with Morna there, and the prospect of the boys joining us for the last few days, the time at Vyners Court promised to pass most brightly.

And so it did, though, like many pleasant passages in life, I cannot recollect any very specially interesting or remarkable incidents that it was distinguished by—till, that is to say, its very close. And in saying this I am not speaking with perfect accuracy, for the incident I am about to relate did not occur during our stay with the Vyners, but elsewhere.

As to this 'elsewhere,' I cannot say where it was, for reasons that will be readily appreciated when I come to the strange narration which alone has suggested to me that my history might not be without interest for others. For these reasons I have hitherto refrained, and must continue to refrain, from giving their real names to any of the places connected with it. And if the part of the country I am now going to describe is recognised by any one who may have happened to visit it, I may add that the special spot on which the interest is concentrated is no longer in existence; while those who then inhabited it are all dispersed—some dead, some at the other ends of the world.

The two boys arrived at Vyners Court at the end of our fortnight there; just as, to our regret, my father was beginning to say we must fix a day for our return home.

And again, as before, an unexpected letter interfered with his intention of travelling straight back to Holme Alders—interfered again, as before, in a pleasurable way.

'Whom do you think I have heard from this morning?' papa said, looking up from his letters. We were all at breakfast. 'Lucy, you are quick at guessing. Whom do you say?'

Aunt Lucy smiled. She was always open to any commendation from her brother-in-law.

'Really,' she replied, 'you flatter me. I did not know I was at all good at that sort of thing. Suppose we all try to guess. You, Margaret—I am sure you are quick-witted, my dear.'

Papa glanced round him dubiously.

'No,' he said. 'I scarcely think'——

I suddenly interrupted him. I had been on the point of saying I could not possibly guess (for I knew that there would have been nothing to call forth his remark had the letter in question been from any of the Weald people, and I could think of no one else), when—and this has happened to me more than once in life—a sort of inspiration came over me, a flash of intuition in no way to be accounted for.

'Papa,' I exclaimed, 'I do believe I know. Isn't

your letter from old Mr Gladwyn—the one they call old Uncle Peter?'

Papa looked almost startled.

'My dear child,' he said, 'how *did* you know? You have never seen his handwriting?'

'No; and if I had, that wouldn't explain it,' I said, laughing, 'for I have not seen any of your letters this morning, outside or inside. No, I can't tell you how I knew. It just came into my head.'

A murmur of 'How strange!' went round the table.

'I hope you are not going to become a "clairvoyante," Margaret,' said Aunt Lucy, with some anxiety in her tone. It was in the early days of talk and inquiry about mesmerism and such things, and people were beginning to allow that 'there must be something in it,' and in some cases to feel not a little alarmed.

'She won't do herself much harm in that direction, I think,' said papa lightly. 'My Meg is an eminently practical person. All the same it *is* a rather remarkable guess. Yes, my letter is from old Peter. He has heard from Mrs Gladwyn or Arthur of our being here, and begs me to try if possible to go and see him, as it is not a very long journey from here. He'—and he referred to his letter again—'he wants to see me about Mrs Gladwyn's affairs.'

'Oh yes—of course,' said Aunt Lucy discreetly. 'I hope they are getting settled. I suppose this old gentleman has been very kind to them, has he not? But, of course, he has not much in his power.'

'He cannot be rich,' said papa. 'No one knows very much about his means, but he lives most simply. Yes, he has been very good to Mr Gladwyn; I almost think it is my duty to go and see him. But it would be very dull for Meg.'

'Leave her here,' exclaimed my aunt and uncle together, 'and pick her up again on your way back.'

Papa smiled.

'My dear friends,' he said, 'you are the most hospitable people in the world, but—forgive my saying so—you have rather original ideas as to the direction of our way home. It would be a tremendous round to come back here from Bronstanton instead of going on from there. No '—— he hesitated. 'I have an idea,' he began again. 'Don't you think Morna would be the better for a little sea-air, and the boys none the worse for it? I am sure it would do Meg no harm. Suppose you trust us with these three young people for ten days or so at Kammersbay? It is only an hour or so from Bronstanton. I could go over to see old Mr Gladwyn from there two or three times if necessary, most comfortably.'

I don't think any of us clapped our hands—we were rather too grown-up for that kind of demonstration—but we were all four intensely delighted, and looked with the greatest anxiety at Aunt Lucy's face for signs of consent. So weighty a matter, however, could not be decided at once.

'We must talk it over,' was all she would say.

Still, that was much better than a direct refusal. And papa, knowing Aunt Lucy well, let the matter drop for the moment.

It was all settled, however, before we went to bed that evening. The boys came racing to Morna and me, when we were sitting in the garden making plans about all we should do at Kammersbay, with the joyful news that it was to be; and two or three days later we set off—as merry a party as could be imagined—Morna, the boys, and I, with papa and Wellman to keep us in order.

I have seen Kammersbay more than once since, but I remember it best as I first knew it. It has always stood out in my memory as in those days an ideal seaside place. It was not yet fashionable—very much the reverse indeed, for it was scarcely known, and the terrible word 'season' would have conveyed no meaning to the ears of its unsophisticated inhabitants. Yet there were two rival inns—both excellent in a quaint, old-fashioned way—where stray artists and other lay admirers of the picturesque were wont to resort during some months of the year. For the immediate scenery was very charming, and farther inland still bolder and more impressive. My father had known it of old, and had rightly judged that it was just the place to delight boys and girls of our ages.

And we rewarded him by our intense enjoyment of it all. Even now a thrill of fresh pleasure goes through me when I think of those days.

Papa went over two or three times to Bronstanton; the second time he took me with him, as old Mr Gladwyn had seemed a little hurt at our making no demands on his hospitality, and had expressed a wish to see me. I was reluctant to leave Morna and my cousins even for a few hours, but I was afterwards glad to have paid the visit, both for the old gentleman's sake and also because the whole impression it left was so unique and curious. Bronstanton was a small town which gave one the feeling of its having in no way changed for the last century or two, and, so far as any signs to the contrary then went, of its being scarcely likely to do so for a few more hundred years or so. The railway gave it a wide berth, though the coaches had left off running; the ancient glories had departed, and there was no prospect of new ones replacing them. But it seemed all one to the good people of Bronstanton. The cobble-stoned streets remained in their rugged unevenness, with a good fringe of grass in the untrodden corners; some few and far-between lamp-posts, innocent of gas, were all the provision for lighting up in the dark evenings; the shop-windows were small-paned, and the show within prosaic enough. It was all old world to the last degree, and strangely attractive in its way. Since those days it is entirely changed, and is now a busy, bustling, commonplace little town, with two railway stations on rival lines, and the 'last improvements' of every sort flourishing apace.

The quaint, trim figure, the snuff-coloured wig and coat to match . . . made up a personality like no other I have ever seen.

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Mr Gladwyn's little house stood near the church. It was unpretentious in the extreme, but beautifully neat and well-kept; one would almost have said that it belonged to an old maid rather than to an old bachelor. But the choice and delicately cooked luncheon which our host had prepared for us would probably have changed this opinion; and though I knew nothing about wine, I could not help noticing papa's appreciation of some wonderful rare 'brand' which the old gentleman had brought out in his honour.

I would have known him again anywhere, though I had only seen him once, and that not at very close quarters, the day on which he had brought the bad news to the Weald—that miserable day which had seemed the beginning of all the troubles of the dear people there!

The quaint, trim figure; the snuff-coloured wig and coat to match, which really looked as if they had been dyed together; the neat dried-up features and rather jerky way of moving, made up a personality like no other I have ever seen. I enjoyed sitting and looking at him (except for never feeling sure that his bird-like eyes would not all of a sudden be turned upon me). I felt as if there *must* be something of a fairy about him; he made me think of the manikins in some of the old German stories.

To me he was most gracious and courteous, addressing me, when not as Miss Langholme, as 'My

dear young lady,' and repeating his expression of appreciation of 'the honour I had done his poor abode.' It was altogether too quaint and original an experience ever to be forgotten.

At parting he held out to me a tiny packet containing something which he begged me to gratify him by accepting as a souvenir of a very old man, who was infinitely delighted or enchanted—I forget which—to have made my acquaintance. I opened it when I found myself in the carriage, in which we drove back to the nearest railway station, whence half-an-hour's journey brought us to Kammersbay. It contained a small but evidently valuable little casket of tortoise-shell, set in gold, and inside the casket was a seal, most beautifully engraved—so said papa, who was a good judge of such things—the subject being a bird on the wing, with the words, 'I come.'

'How funny and pretty!' I said. 'I should like to use the seal always, papa—mayn't I? You don't think I need to keep it in the box?'

'Oh no; fasten it to your watch-chain,' said papa. 'It is intended to be worn; you see there is a ring on purpose.'

And from that day to this I have always worn old Mr Peter Gladwyn's seal. No one has ever been able to say with perfect certainty what the stone is. Some say one thing, some another; and no wonder, for it changes colour in the most curious opal-like way, according to the weather, or the temperature,

or the time of day—according even, I have sometimes really thought, to the mood or circumstances of its owner! It had a part to play in my future life, this curious little toy; it is not surprising that I have sometimes felt almost inclined to credit it with occult properties.

I have said that my father went over two or three times to Bronstanton while we were at Kammersbay. He must have done so three times at least, for I know that it was on one of those days that we four made an expedition some miles inland from the bay, to the wilder and more rugged country which I have alluded to.

We had heard about the scenery of this mountainous district from our landlord's daughter, Mahlah Lennox, a fine, strong young woman who waited on us at table, and several times volunteered to be our guide in our walks and explorings about the coast.

'I wish you could see Lobb's Rocks and the Rushing Falls,' she said to us. 'If the gentleman wasn't afraid, I could take you there nicely one day. Father'd lend us the cart as far as Hamlyn—there's two or three cottages there, and a little inn where we could leave it, for beyond that there's only a horse-track—no way for wheels. But I don't think it'd be too much for you young ladies, though there's a bit or two of steep climbing.'

'Oh, we *love* climbing and scrambling!' Morna exclaimed. 'I'm sure we shouldn't be tired. Couldn't

we make a sort of picnic of it, and take our dinner, or luncheon, with us?'

'Could you be spared for a whole day?' I asked Mahlah.

Mahlah thought she might be, as there were no visitors at the 'White Nag'—the name of the little inn—but ourselves. She would see what mother said.

'Mother' proved quite willing. Then there was papa's leave to obtain. He looked a little dubious at first, saying he did not quite like the idea of our going without him, though his accompanying us was impossible; he had to go over again to Bronstanton, and before doing so must give the best part of a day to papers, &c., relating to the Gladwyns' affairs, which he and the old gentleman were getting into shape. In his kind heart I think he shrewdly suspected, and did not resent, the fact that for us four the making the expedition on our own account was half the fun of it. But when he had spoken to Mahlah, and gone into the details of the excursion with her, he seemed quite satisfied, and it was settled that we should have our picnic next day but one, 'weather permitting.'

This last consideration did not give us much anxiety. The weather had been delightful since we came to Kammersbay, and it was not likely, as Terry said, that it would change all of a sudden 'just out of ill-nature.' Nor did it. That Friday morning broke with the promise of a perfect day—a promise which was fulfilled. It was an ideal 'day in June.'

Papa was off betimes to Bronstanton, wishing us a successful excursion, and by ten o'clock we were all afoot—metaphorically speaking, that is; for, as Mahlah had arranged, we started in her father's cart, driving as far as driving was possible on the road to the heights inland known as Lobb's Rocks.

We left Wellman at home. She was of a somewhat timorous nature, and felt evidently relieved when told that her attendance would not be required; murmuring something about being glad of a little time to herself to repair the damages to skirts and jackets, which she regarded as appalling during our stay at the seaside. So everybody was pleased, except that Ned somewhat regretted the fun he would have had in frightening my maid by all manner of startling tricks.

'She is such a goose,' he said. 'I do believe, Meg, if we told her there were robbers and brigands in the caves up among the hills—there *are* caves; Mahlah 's seen them—she 'd believe us, and be frightened out of her wits, and think we were all going to be carried off and hidden up there.'

We laughed at the idea. How impossible and absurd a fancy it seemed! Long afterwards Ned's chatter was brought back to my memory in a strange way.

'Or snakes,' said Morna. 'Wellman is madly afraid of snakes. She says, "There 's just *one* thing I can't stand, Miss Morna, and that 's snakes;" whereas I really don't know what things she *could* stand: do you, Meg?'

'No, indeed; she shrieks at any creature with horns, and vows it's a bull; and if ever we meet a strange dog she's sure it's mad. And yet she is quite a country-girl.'

''Tis queer,' said Mahlah, who had listened with interest to our remarks on poor Wellman. 'I never could understand being frighted—no, never—for such-likes as bulls and snakes and dogs. Bless me, fancy being afeared of a dog!' and she smiled with good-natured contempt. And indeed she was a fine-looking creature; it would have been difficult to picture her afraid of anything. But after a moment she went on again—she was driving us herself in the cart: 'No; living creatures I could stand up to, but I won't say as I wouldn't be skeered of other sorts;' and she half dropped her voice.

'What do you mean by "other sorts," Mahlah?' I inquired, with some curiosity.

'Such as isn't living and have no call to be wandering about back here again when their time's over and done with,' Mahlah replied decidedly.

'Oh, you mean ghosts,' I said. 'Well, lots of otherwise brave people are afraid of ghosts. But are you afraid of other kinds of spirits, Mahlah? Up here in this out-of-the-way part of the world there must be all sorts of queer stories of mountain-sprites and water-sprites, and fairies and brownies.'

The girl shook her head.

'I've never heard tell of them,' she said. 'Least-

ways, very little. They do say as there's a strange sort of a bogie about Lobb's Rocks. It stands like a great big shadow, where no shadow could be thrown, and then it gets littler and littler, and thicker and blacker, till it's no bigger than a small man; and whoever meets him had best look out, though I can't rightly say what ill 'd come to them.'

We all listened with great interest.

'That's rather a creepy story,' said Morna. 'I should prefer not to meet that shadowy gentleman, I think.'

'I 'll show you the part of the rocks where they say it comes out from,' said our conductress, pleased at the attention her story had received.

An hour's drive brought us to our first halting-place —the little inn at Hamlyn. There we left the cart, Mahlah arranging that the horse should be looked after and ready for us on our return, which she calculated should be about four o'clock in the afternoon. Then we started off on the real part of the expedition, armed with good strong sticks to help us over the roughest places, Mahlah and the boys carrying the packages Mrs Lennox had prepared for us in the way of luncheon.

CHAPTER X.

THREE YEARS.

IT was a perfect day, as I have said already. Not only perfect in itself, but just exactly suited to an expedition of the kind; neither too hot nor too cold, too windy nor too still, and with nothing in the way of clouds on the horizon or lurid gleams to cause any uneasiness.

A couple of hours' walking—'steady' walking I cannot call it, as the way was sometimes so steep that, in spite of sturdy limbs and youthful lungs, we had to call a halt every now and then for a few moments' rest—brought us out at last on to a sort of little plateau, whence we had a capital view of the famous 'rocks.' Most curious they certainly were, looking exactly as if one of the hills had been roughly torn in two, and the one half carried away, leaving the jagged edges in all their bare, fantastic outlines. The falls, Mahlah told us, were hidden by the rocks; but after we had rested

and eaten our dinner, she promised to take us round by a not too impossible path to a point whence we could see them to perfection. And so she did, and a charming sight they were, tumbling 'Lodore-like,' rushing down in the summer sunshine like a parcel of merry children suddenly released from school.

And here, behind the rocks, there was a curious surprise. We were at a considerable height, but now a sort of tableland stretched before us for some distance—a level, peaceful scene, with one or two white homesteads, and here and there a copse of thickly-growing though not lofty trees, to break the monotony, making it somehow difficult to realise our altitude above the not far remote sea.

'Dear me,' Morna exclaimed, 'we seem to have got to the top of the world somehow!'

'Not quite,' I said as I pointed to a blue, cloud-like line farther off. 'The hills over there are much higher, aren't they, Mahlah?'

'Oh dear me, yes, miss,' replied our guide. 'That's the Coppericks. We call them mountains, but they're never climbed from this side. I don't believe as even father has ever been as far as that. It's farther off than you'd think.'

'And there is no road anywhere near, I suppose?' I said. 'How very lonely the people in those farm-houses must be!'

Mahlah glanced in their direction.

'There is a road up by Felts,' she said. 'No one

goes to those houses round this way. I don't even know the folk living in them. There 's a little village a mile or two from them, and a church at Felts, four miles or so away. Yes, it must be rather lonesome; and I think there 's no one living at that smaller farm. They both belong to the same people.'

'How hot it is!' Morna exclaimed. 'Have we time, Mahlah, to walk as far as that dear little wood and rest in the shade for a few minutes?'

Our guide glanced at the sun.

'Oh yes,' she replied. 'We needn't be starting back for an hour or so yet.'

So we all got up again—we had been half lying on the turf—and made our way to Morna's wood. It was deliciously cool there, and a little stream, one of the tiny tributaries of the falls no doubt, flowed gently through the middle of the copse—so gently and softly that one could scarcely believe in its mild ripples ever joining in the uproar of the great volume of waters not half a mile away.

'Oh, what a delicious place!' said Morna. 'I don't think I have ever breathed such lovely air. It seems purer and fresher than down below. I wonder if that is fancy?'

'No, miss; I don't think so,' replied Mahlah. 'I 've heard it said before, by visitors of ours who came up here. It 's very uncommon, father says, to have woods like these so high up; though, to be sure, they 're nothing much as to size, and the trees are no height.'

'I don't care for that,' said Morna; 'it's just perfectly sweet and lovely.'

Her glance fell on Terence. Boy-like, unable to sit still without fidgeting, he had got out his pocket-knife, and was busy whittling at a bit of wood he had picked up.

'Oh Terry,' his cousin exclaimed, 'will you lend me your knife? I know what I'd like to do—let us cut our names, or initials, or something on these trees.' She gave a look round. 'Yes,' she went on, 'over there I see some good sturdy old trunks. Come along, Meg, and see what we can do.'

I stretched myself lazily. 'I don't feel as energetic as you,' I replied. 'Go and carve whatever you like, and call me to admire it when it's done.'

So she and Terry moved off, leaving little Ned and me to rest in peace beside Mahlah. Ned seemed rather tired; he was not as strong as his brother.

The carving occupied some time. We heard their voices discussing it eagerly, as if it was a matter of great consequence. Then came a summons.

'See here, Meg,' Morna called out; 'I'm sure you must like this. It was Terry's idea; and he's done most of it. I had no idea it was such bothersome work.'

I got up and joined them. 'This' was a sort of monogram, or interlaced initials—two 'M's,' an 'L,' and an 'S,' though the two 'M's' were by far the most distinct.

'Isn't it nice?' said Morna, with pride. 'Do you see?'—and she followed the marking with her finger—'M. L. and M. S.: Meg Langholme and Morna Sweyn. It was Terry's idea.'

I admired it, and it deserved admiration, for Terry had some skill in designing such things.

'Yes,' I said, 'it's very nice indeed. And,' I went on as, at that moment, Mahlah joined us, 'it would do for you too, Mahlah. Your initials are the same as mine, you see.'

The girl blushed a little with pleasure. 'Well, miss,' she said, 'to be sure now—that is odd. I'll promise you one thing: I'll never come up here—and it's not often a summer passes without my coming—but what I'll have a good look at the tree and the letters, and wish you both well.'

'Thank you, Mahlah,' we said together; 'and we'll not forget you either, you may be sure.'

Then Mahlah, glancing up again at the sun through the branches, said it was time to be starting back. The boys—Terry at least—grumbled a little. He had wanted to execute another piece of artistic work, in the shape of a monogram of his own and Ned's initials, but Mahlah was firm. She had promised 'your papa,' she said, turning to me, to take the greatest care of us, and she meant to do so.

'We'll not be home any too soon,' she said. So Terence had to give in.

As we passed the rocks again we reminded her that

she had not shown us the point where the strange shadow was said to emerge from its hiding-place. Mahlah stood, shading her eyes with her hand from the afternoon sun, and gazed fixedly at the cliffs.

'It 's over there,' she said at last; 'over where it looks as if it were the opening into a cave. Do you see a bush, missie, right on the top? Well, fancy a straight line down from there, and you 'll see the place. There 's a sort of a dark line in the stone just above.'

'Oh, yes,' I exclaimed, 'I see!' And so did the others. 'Is it really the entrance to a cave?'

Mahlah shook her head. 'I can't rightly say. I've never been there, though the boys scrambled down to it once. It 's not so very difficult. But they only saw a dark opening, and then they got scared, thinking of the shadow. And I don't believe any one ever goes near the place.'

There was no shadow to be seen there at present, most certainly; and as we walked on in the cheerful summer afternoon sunshine, it was difficult to realise that the place could be associated with weird or eerie fancies of any kind. We found our cart and horse waiting for us at the little Hamlyn inn, and had a merry drive home, reaching our present headquarters about five minutes after papa's return from Bronstanton. He was standing at the door of the 'White Nag,' looking out for us, as we drove up.

'I have finished all the business I had to see to

with old Mr Gladwyn,' he said to me that evening, 'and bidden him farewell; so now, my little Meg, we must really turn our faces homewards. This has been a pleasant little finish up of our travels, though, has it not?'

'Yes, indeed,' I said, 'it has been quite delightful. But I am glad to go home too, papa. And it is so nice to think we shall find Auntie Glad and Thea at the Weald; and Arthur will be coming down now and then, won't he?'

'I hope so,' papa replied. 'We mustn't let him overwork himself.'

'No, of course not,' I agreed, not without a slight feeling of compunction, as I realised that during these last pleasant weeks poor Arthur had been working hard in the City, with no break or intermission. 'And it must have been so hot in London,' I added to myself.

Three days later saw us again at home. We had parted with Morna and the boys at a junction on the railway, where Uncle Vyner had sent a servant to meet them. We were sorry to separate, of course, but yet our good-byes were very cheerful. We had been so happy together, and looked forward to meeting again before long.

'Next Christmas, at latest,' we called out to each other as our *au revoir*—an anticipation which was not realised.

And now, perhaps, it will be as well to pass over

more quickly the events of the next two or three years. These were not in any special way connected with that part of my history which I am approaching. They were happy and peaceful years, as old 'Tilda Drew had predicted. And this reminds me that my return home that sunny June was shadowed by one cloud—we were met by the news of the faithful old woman's death. She had passed away painlessly and tranquilly a few days before, almost her last words being a message of affectionate farewell to my father and myself.

'I would have liked to see her again,' I said to Ruth Ann Blunt, who came up to see me the morning after our arrival to deliver in person this touching little message. 'Did she seem disappointed at our not being back in time?' For the Blunt sisters had been with her at the last.

Ruth Ann shook her head gently.

'No, miss, I can't say as she did,' she replied. 'She knew it was not to be; she told us several times lately that she wasn't to see missie or the squire again in this world, but she was quite content. 'Twould all come right in the end, she'd say.'

'I wonder what she meant,' I murmured, thinking aloud. But Ruth Ann caught the words, and again she shook her head.

'I can't say, I'm sure,' she replied, imagining that my inquiry was addressed to her. And after a moment's silence she went on:

'She was strange now and then, was the dame, but she was a good woman, a good Christian woman. She had a kind word for our poor Phil, too.'

'He is getting on all right, I hope?' I said, rather thoughtlessly, for Arthur had impressed upon me that Phil's present whereabouts had better not be alluded to.

Ruth Ann looked a trifle confused, for to the rustic mind it always savours slightly of discourtesy not to respond to friendly inquiries with full particulars and details.

'Oh yes, miss, thank you,' she said; 'he 's very well, and'—— but here I interrupted her.

'Never mind; that 's all I wanted to know,' I said quickly; and then I went on to talk of her old father, and other local matters of commonplace interest.

But the tidings of 'Tilda's death deepened the impression of all she had said to me.

'She *must* have had second sight,' I decided in my own mind.

We found Thea looking wonderfully better, and I soon saw that she was resolutely acting up to the brave determination she had expressed to me, of taking up afresh and cheerfully the life that had been restored to her, and making a new start. Unselfish she had always been, but now it really seemed as if, in living and acting for the good of others, happiness and strength came to her in unsought-for reward.

But her resolution was to be tested before long in

an unexpected way. As the pleasant, genial summer faded into autumn, and damp days and chilly winds came again to herald the approaching winter, Thea's cough returned also. She tried to make light of it, but before long it grew evident that her strength was slightly flagging. Then, as the result of consultation with Arthur, my father determined to interfere; and after a good deal of discussion, it was decided that Mrs Gladwyn and her daughter should spend the winter abroad, and that I should accompany them. My doing so was not at first proposed. I think it partly suggested itself to my father when he saw Thea's extreme disappointment and distress at the thought of having to leave home again.

'I really feel as if I could scarcely bear it,' she said to me the first time we talked about it, 'though I have so determined to be cheerful. Even the expense, Meg—though poor Arthur declares it can be easily managed, and that nothing matters as much as for me to get quite well.'

I was almost more depressed than she.

'I shall be so terribly dull,' I could not help saying.

And I repeated this to papa that evening when we sat talking together after dinner. He did not speak for a minute or two; then he looked up suddenly.

'How would you like to go with them?' he asked.

'Papa!' I exclaimed, scarcely crediting my ears, 'do you really mean it?'

'Yes,' he replied; 'you have never been out of your own country, and the mere seeing other places is education in itself. Then, of course, you would have excellent opportunities of improving yourself in French and music and so on, and Thea would see that your English studies did not suffer. Yes, the more I think of it, the more the idea commends itself to me.'

'But, papa,' I rejoined, as another aspect of the plan occurred to me, 'about *you*. Wouldn't you miss me dreadfully?'

He smiled a little sadly.

'There must always be at least one "against" as ballast to the "for's,"' he said. 'I won't say that I shall not be lonely without you; you would not believe me if I did. But I may be able to join you for a few weeks during the winter, and, as you know, I have always plenty to do at home.'

He rode over to the Weald the very next morning, and it was all decided about. If my father had wanted a reward for his unselfishness, he certainly got it in the delight of Thea and her mother, especially as he made them realise the advantages to me of this new plan. Practically too, no doubt, it helped them, without in any way jarring on their feelings of independence.

Good fortune seemed to follow our arrangements; the Weald was let very favourably for the hunting season, so that no home anxieties accompanied its owners abroad.

And early in November we started for our destination in the South.

It is not my intention to enter into any details of those pleasant months. All went well. Thea's cough gradually disappeared, and her general health improved most satisfactorily. And when papa came out to us, he declared himself delighted with the improvement in my French accent, and in the general result of my foreign experiences.

It all, indeed, proved such a success that the programme was repeated the following year, the same tenants returning to the Weald, the same pretty villa receiving us in the sunny South; and the enjoyment of that second winter was further enhanced to us all by Arthur's joining us, as well as my father, for a Christmas holiday.

A third flight southwards was not found necessary for Thea, greatly to our relief, happily though the two preceding winters had passed. For late in the autumn came the summons to India which Arthur had known was in prospect for him. He was not to leave till February, so we were all delighted to be within hail of him during the last three months, the concluding fortnight of which he was able to spend at home.

But at best his leaving was a terrible wrench. I had by no means realised it till it came. I shall never forget the afternoon on which we bade each other good-bye. I had driven over to the Weald on purpose, alone in my little cart, and Arthur brought

me back to our own lodge. It was still daylight, the clear, cold daylight of February in the country; still early in the afternoon, for I would not intrude on the very last hours, which he owed to his mother and sister alone. I remember the pale, thin look of the sun as I glanced up through the bare branches of the trees in our avenue, where, a few yards within the gates, Arthur suddenly pulled up.

'I won't come any farther, Meg,' he said. 'I must hurry back, and I would rather say good-bye to you here, where there is no one about. Good-bye, little Meg. You won't forget me; I'm sure of that;' and he held out his hand.

I put mine into it, and he kissed my fingers gently.

For a moment I felt surprised, almost hurt, for hitherto on great occasions he had kissed me as he kissed Thea; but a glance at his face changed my feelings. It was from no lessening of affection on his part, I felt instinctively, that the outward form of its expression was altered, and for the first time there came over me with a rush the realisation of this parting.

He was going *so* far, and perhaps for so long! A sob rose in my throat.

'Dear Arthur,' I said, choking it down, 'don't make me cry. Forget you—no, of course I never could—never—never. You were my first friend, and nobody can *ever* seem the same as you!'

He looked down at me wistfully, then sprang out of the cart.

'Good-bye,' he said again, laying his hand for a moment on my shoulder as he stood beside me.

'Don't stay away *very* long!' I said imploringly. 'Try to come home, even if it's only for a little visit, next—no, I suppose it can't be *next* year; but perhaps the year after?'

'Perhaps,' he repeated, but there was not very much hope in his voice.

He went round to the pony's head—Frolic was an old favourite—patted him lovingly, then with one other good-bye he hurried down the avenue, and I drove slowly up to the hall-door.

The blank was great, very great, after he had gone, and it took some little time to get to the worst of it. For since Arthur had been living in London we had got used to his absence, cheerfully broken as it was by his occasional visits. But now the weeks went on slowly and monotonously into months—two, three, then six—till Arthur had been a whole half-year away, and the beautiful summer was again on its wane, and letters were all we had of him!

We were not unhappy. By 'we' I mean Thea and her mother as well as papa and I; for, looking back to this part of my life, we seem to have been really like one family. Arthur wrote hopefully, as was ever his way; and we knew it had to be, but we missed him. I dread the winter, for the severer months made it

more difficult for us to meet frequently, and I felt myself growing older in an indefinable way.

'I shall be so glad when it is spring again,' I said one day to Thea. 'After Arthur has been a whole year away, it will feel more possible, somehow, to look forward to his return.'

Thea did not at once reply.

'You will be eighteen soon, Meg darling,' she said. 'I can scarcely believe it!'

'Yes, eighteen in April,' I replied. 'So, even if Arthur possibly comes home as soon as next year, I should be really grown-up, shouldn't I, Thea?'

Again Thea glanced at me, this time with a little smile.

'Yes, darling, quite grown-up,' she repeated.

After all, that winter, which I had looked forward to with more or less dread, passed pleasantly. Two things happened to cheer us. One was the Christmas visit, which we had missed for two years, of our Vyner relations, accompanied by dear Morna. They stayed with us for almost three weeks, and we were all very happy together. Since Mr Gladwyn's death, and the great sympathy she had then felt for his wife and step-daughter, the best of Aunt Lucy had shown itself to them; for, in spite of her somewhat autocratic manner and her really lamentable want of tact, she had a truly kind and large nature, and, under the circumstances, any touch of jealousy she might formerly have felt of the dwellers of the

Weald with regard to their relations to my father and myself had quite disappeared.

So there was no jarring among us that Christmas-tide, though the 'vacant chairs' were there.

The second incident which tended to brighten the monotony of that rather long winter was a letter from Arthur in which he alluded to the quite unexpected possibility of his return home on important business for his firm the following autumn.

Thea, so bright and radiant with delight that one could scarcely have recognised her as the Thea of three years ago, hurried over to tell us of this joyful anticipation the very day on which her mother had received the letter. She was a little, just a very little, disappointed at the calmness with which I received her news.

'I thought you would have been *so* surprised, as well as pleased,' she said to me, with a touch of reproach; and her words made me feel a little puzzled as to why I was not more astonished.

'I think I have always felt he would come back sooner than you hoped,' I said at last. 'I didn't quite know it myself, but now it seems to me as if I had been counting upon it, down at the bottom of my heart, always. And now I am quite sure that he will come, even though you say it is only a possibility.'

Thea's face brightened again.

'I devoutly hope you will be a true prophetess,

little Meg,' she said. 'Now and then it has seemed to me as if you had a touch of second sight about you.'

'I have felt that myself once or twice,' I said dreamily, 'especially since—now don't laugh at me, Thea, for what I am going to say—especially since old 'Tilda Drew's death. Nothing will convince me but that what she said will come true.'

'What was it?' asked Thea curiously. 'You have never told me much about it, Meg.'

'I can't,' I replied; 'it was very vague, except as to one or two things I would rather not think about. She told me not to think about them much beforehand; that I would remember when the word came, but that then I must take heed.'

'You almost frighten me,' said Thea.

'Don't be frightened,' I replied; 'the time hasn't come yet, and I am going to have a good spell of happiness first.'

'And perhaps,' said Thea, 'the taking heed will keep away the harm, whatever it is.'

'I don't know,' I replied. 'I wish she had told me a little more. But I doubt if she knew more herself; most likely she didn't.'

But seeing Thea's face grow grave again, I turned the subject.

'Let me see the envelope of Arthur's letter,' I said suddenly.

She held it out to me.

'Yes!' I exclaimed. 'Look at the seal, Thea; isn't that a good augury?'

Thea was a little short-sighted; she examined the seal closely, and gave a little cry of pleasure.

'Yes, indeed,' she replied. 'I have noticed this seal of his, and wondered where he got it, but I never read the words before: "I come"—and a bird flying! Nothing could be more hopeful!'

'It is the impression of a little keepsake I gave him, or lent him rather, when he went away,' I said. And then I told her about the strange stone, with its beautiful engraving, which old Mr Peter Gladwyn had given me in the tiny casket. 'I have kept it with a coin of Arthur's in it which he gave me as a pledge for the seal; and I knew Uncle Peter wouldn't mind, he is so fond of Arthur.'

'Of course he would not,' said Thea. 'In spite of his odd looks, I strongly suspect there is a great element of'—— But here she suddenly stopped short, and somehow I did not ask her to finish her sentence.

CHAPTER XI.

THE NIGHT-RIDER.

DID prove a true prophetess. That next autumn saw Arthur with us again. He was full of delight at the extraordinary 'good luck,' as he called it, of his having been selected to come home for the settlement of the important and complicated business questions which had arisen between the Indian and London branches of the firm to which he belonged. 'Good luck' none of us would allow to be a correct description of the circumstance.

'It is much more a matter of "good management,"' papa said when Arthur was congratulating himself in this way. 'They have learnt your value already, my boy;' with which opinion his mother and sister and I myself most cordially agreed.

Arthur stayed in England for three months—just over Christmas—to our great joy; and when he left —no, there is no use entering into details; there are memories so sacred that one almost shrinks from

putting them into words; and this feeling increases, I think, with advancing years, so let me tell it simply. When Arthur left us we had, to use the pretty, quaint expression of our forebears, 'plighted our troth.' The remembrance of it all is to me full of a quiet, trustful happiness. I think, somehow, I had always known this would come, though up to the very time of this home visit of his I had never, even in my innermost thoughts, given shape or form to the sweet, underlying consciousness that, in some special way, 'my boy' of old and I belonged to each other.

He had had no definite intention as regarded me when he first returned. He dared not, he said, knowing that, in a modest way, I was an heiress; knowing, too, how inexperienced, in a worldly sense, I was—how little society I had seen; all of which conspired to make him dread my father's displeasure at the idea of such a thing.

But circumstances which I need not particularise, trivialities apparently, or what we call 'accident,' brought about an understanding and mutual confidences between him and my dear father; and once assured of *his* more than consent, of his hearty delight in the prospect of such a husband for his motherless child, Arthur hesitated no longer; and as for me, I never hesitated at all!

It all happened just a fortnight before he left—that was the worst of it. Not that we needed to learn to know each other; our lives had been intermingled

almost as long as we could remember. But with the new relationship came, of course, new interests, new sympathies, new delight in each other's society; and that second parting *did* seem a little hard, especially as its duration could not but be indefinite. I was very young; papa was assuredly in no hurry to part with me; and Arthur, though several years my senior, was naturally anxious to have a position of his own, and a certain, even though moderate, income, before marrying. Then, again, the one condition my father had attached to his consent was that I should not go to India, and as Arthur's residence there was not likely to extend over many years, all pointed to the advisability of a long engagement—not in those days looked upon with the dread and misgivings which the mere mention of such a thing now inspires.

But a long engagement, accompanied by a long and indefinite separation, must always be a trial. And this time I was without any of the cheering presentiments of Arthur's speedier return which had so joyfully been realised in the case of his first absence. On the contrary, happy, intensely happy though I was in the avowed fact of his devotion to me, delightful though it was to have our engagement openly recognised, there was at times a strange weight at my heart, which I could not throw off. What it meant I did not know in the least. I could not, even in imagination, explain it.

For everything promised brightly for the future.

Arthur's health was excellent—the climate of the place where he was, exceptionally good for India, had not in the slightest degree affected him injuriously; I myself was not only young, but thoroughly well and strong; and even if Arthur's best hopes as to the position he looked forward to gaining should not be altogether fulfilled, there was a certainty of his doing well enough to make our marriage in no way imprudent two or three years hence. And on all three points my mind was at rest.

Whence, then, came the jarring note in my reasonably happy anticipations? I could not tell.

'I know I am not morbid,' I said to myself, 'and I do not think any girl in the world ever had so much cause for thankfulness. Why can't I be *quite*, completely happy, except, of course, for the being separated from Arthur?'

These questions I put to myself whenever the dark cloud of indefinable apprehensions returned, but never with any satisfactory result. Once or twice the idea suggested itself that I had been more lastingly affected by old 'Tilda's queer, possibly occult, powers than I had at the time in the least suspected.

'I wonder if she really was a sort of witch,' I thought; though I dismissed the notion with something like self-reproach. 'She was a *good* woman, a good, devout soul,' I said to myself; 'she wouldn't have wished any one any harm. Possibly, just possibly, these sort of fears that come over me are in some way

a warning. But a warning of *what?*' and again my mind grew confused and wearied with trying to explain my sensations.

They were only occasional visitors, however, as I have said. For days—nay, for weeks and months at a time I felt quite untroubled. Even now I cannot say that these so-called presentiments or impressions had any real root. If no strange wrench had destroyed the happy placidity of my life's stream, I should, no doubt, have forgotten all about them long before this; for I have noticed that, to any one of thoughtful or imaginative nature, the prospect of great happiness is often accompanied by a curious fear.

Two years passed—more than two years, for it was early January when Arthur left, and my birthday fell in April, the birthday which that spring saw me attain my majority—I was twenty-one.

It was a happy birthday. A letter and a small parcel from Arthur, received by Thea some days before to keep till the actual date, were the first things on which my eyes fell when I awoke that bright morning. The parcel contained a ruby bracelet of native workmanship; the letter I have still, very old and faded. Then there followed a beautiful present of a diamond pendant from my father, and other less costly but almost as dearly-prized gifts from the two beloved friends at the Weald, and many kindly offerings from our humbler neighbours. A letter from Morna Sweyn, too, brought pleasant news. She had joined her parents

in India more than three years before, with small expectations of returning home for a long time; and now some unlooked-for change in her father's position—at this distance of time I cannot exactly recall what it was—had led to his retirement, on a satisfactory pension, and they hoped to be back in their own country for good within a few months. These tidings were specially welcome to me, as I had had a not ill-founded fear that my dear little friend would marry in the East and stay there. It was rarely in those days that an English girl of any attractions returned from India unwedded, and Morna, grown up, was even lovelier and sweeter than I had described her at sixteen. But she had stayed too long at home to take kindly to Anglo-Indian ways, and, to my great delight, none of her many admirers as yet had had power to touch her heart. Her letter concluded with bright anticipations of meeting before long—'certainly before next winter,' she wrote, 'and perhaps even sooner. It would all be too perfect if your Arthur's time out here were to come to an end soon—next year perhaps; though, of course, I don't know in the least if that is possible. Nothing would persuade me to marry before you, because one of the "double M's" *must* be the other's bridesmaid, and you could not be mine, as you know it isn't considered lucky for an engaged girl to be one.'

'The double M's,' I repeated to myself. 'What can she mean?' And then the momentary forgetfulness cleared away, and I recalled the expedition to Lobb's

Rocks, the lovely summer afternoon in the little wood, and the carved monogram over the trunk of the old tree. 'How long ago it seems already!' I thought to myself. 'I should like to go there again some day—and with Arthur.'

Spring and early summer are to me always full of special interest. There is always so much to entice in the outside world, in its ever-recurring childhood. Day by day there is some change, some fresh growth to remark or look out for. Time at this season never seems to lag, so the next few months passed happily and cheerfully. Each letter of Arthur's was more and more full of happy plans for the future.

And now I think I must hasten on to that part of my story which I have more than once alluded to, though but vaguely, as a strange and almost unprecedented experience. I will relate it as circumstantially as possible, for truth even unadorned is indeed often stranger than fiction.

I do not think I ever in my life laid my head on my pillow with feelings of greater peace and quiet happiness than on the night of the 30th of September of that same year. I had reason for special pleasure, for that day's post had brought a letter from Morna, who had arrived in England with her parents some few weeks before, fixing the day but one following for the visit to me which I had been longing for ever since I knew of her return.

Papa had left home that very day for a week's

business in London, and he too had been greatly pleased at hearing that I should not long be left companionless; and in one sense I was scarcely sorry that he should be away, as it seemed to me that Morna and I would have enough to talk about for a week at least without intermission. My last waking thought was about Morna, intermingled, as all my thoughts were, I think, with the ever-present, underlying happy consciousness of the new joy that had come into my life since she and I last met.

'Her coming back from that horribly far-away India seems somehow to bring him nearer. Who knows, after all, but that what she says about his return might somehow come true?' And I fell asleep full of these pleasant thoughts.

It is said that our dreams always closely precede our waking. Whether this be so or not I cannot say, but I had probably slept some hours, when the curious vision came to me which I will try to describe. I use the word 'try' advisedly, for I think all 'dreamers' will agree with me that anything more impossible, save perhaps for one or two of our most gifted poets, than to give adequately the *feeling* of a dream scarcely exists. The fascination, whether of pleasure or pain, of horror or delight, of some dreams transcends all language. This was my experience.

I found myself in a garden. I felt and knew I was in the East. It was night; the scents and fragrance of the tropics seemed all about me. The sky was in-

tensely, darkly blue, brilliantly studded with stars in such numbers as our less transparent atmosphere seldom allows us to see. I think there was no moon. I turned round and gazed about me. There were trees and plants, unmistakably Eastern in their outlines, though, of course, no colour was visible. In front of one, at some little distance, was a pillared terrace of white marble. I walked on slowly in its direction—why I did not know. I seemed to be expecting some one or something, and yet all I did was involuntary. Suddenly a voice reached me, clear and distinct, though it sounded at some distance.

'Turn back, Meg. Meg, my darling, go home.'

It was Arthur's voice; but I did not turn, for when I glanced behind me all had grown suddenly dark; only in front the white columns still shone, and again I heard the voice.

'Too late,' it said. 'It is coming;' and a breeze, a strange, cold breeze, as if in presage of some approaching storm, rose around me with an ominous murmur. Then I stood still, listening, and a new sound fell on my ears—the slow, measured thud of a horse's feet, gradually drawing nearer and nearer, and in a sense I awoke, though still in my dream. I awoke, that is to say, to memory.

'It is the ghostly rider,' I said to myself, though I still believed that I was thousands of miles away from home.

I was thrilled with terror, and the terror—I suppose

it must have been—awoke me in reality. For half a moment the relief was great of finding myself in my own bed, a streak of moonlight stealing in at the window and showing me the familiar objects in its track.

But—what was that? The terror was not all gone, for, fully awake, completely, entirely conscious as I now was, the sound that had frightened me in my dream, the sound which had helped to awake me—for it was a *real* sound—was still there, the measured beat of a horse's hoofs at no great distance, and still approaching. Then returned all the sensations which always accompanied this midnight warning, which twice before had come to me, and I felt exactly as I had done years ago, the last time I had heard it when still a child. I knew precisely what would happen. I heard the rider come nearer and nearer, till he stopped apparently at our lodge-gates. Then ensued a momentary silence, as if they were being opened, and then—my heart almost stopped beating, and I asked myself, as I had done the other times, 'Was he entering? Would he ride up to our very door? Should I be compelled by some terrible power to rise and look out of the window at some ghastly visions?' A moment or two, which seemed like hours, passed; then again—for remember, though I have never hitherto entered into these details, the drama had been enacted before in precisely the same way—a sort of weight rose from off my heart as I heard the horse's steps once more, this time slowly and measurably receding.

'He is going away, thank God,' I said to myself; and a voice seemed to whisper in my ear, 'Yes, thank God, it is not death this time.'

Whence came that voice I know not. It could not have been the remembrance of anything old 'Tilda had said to me; for, whether she herself knew it or not, I am certain she had never revealed to me that when the warning meant death the rider was heard within our actual precincts; or so, at least, my experience has led me to believe. Still further, I am of opinion that when he comes to foretell the last summons as to the head of the house, his halt is made exactly in front of the hall-door itself.

Slowly, very slowly, my half-paralysed powers recovered themselves; with each fainter and fainter thud of the hoofs my strength came back. But still, till every slightest perception of our spectral visitor had faded, I could not have moved, it seems to me, to have saved my life.

Nor, when the power to do so had returned, did I wish to move. Strange to say, I fell almost instantly into a heavy, perfectly dreamless sleep; the exhaustion caused by what I had gone through must have been great, for I slept till nearly my usual time of waking.

I awoke to a dull gray morning. What was it I had to remember? The events of the day before returned to my mind at first; no, there had been nothing wrong. I had gone to bed as happy as ever I was in my life. But gradually—perhaps such experiences are recorded

in a different part of the brain, in some, as a rule, rarely explored corner not always open to our consciousness—gradually it all came back to me: the dream, and then the reality, for that the passing of the nightly rider had been literally heard by my material ears I could not for an instant doubt, nor have I ever doubted it.

What did it mean? What could it mean? My first thought naturally was for Arthur, for the associations of the dream were also, naturally, strong upon me. But the more I thought it over, the less did my misgivings attach themselves to him personally.

'If dreams mean anything at all,' I reflected, 'this one signified that Arthur was fearing for me; it was not a warning of danger to *him*.'

Could, then, the warning refer to my father? He was away; and I half sprang up in bed when this thought struck me. How could I ascertain his safety, or transmit to him my anxiety lest any evil should be threatening him? It was before the days of telegrams, and no letter from me could reach him till the following morning, and by that time, according to old 'Tilda's interpretation of our family traditions, the danger would either have happened or been averted, as the ghostly rider's visit always took place in the night immediately preceding the untoward event, of whatever nature it might be.

The remembrance of 'Tilda reminded me of something more. The *first* time of the two she had pre-

dicted for my experience of the spectral visitant was evidently not connected with my father, for she had warned me to seek safety beside him; and with a sigh of relief, so far as he was concerned, I lay down again.

Clearly, increasingly clearly, I saw that the warning was meant for myself personally, and with this conviction came an almost invigorating feeling of courage, well-nigh amounting to defiance. What had *I* to be afraid of? I had not one enemy, or even an ill-wisher, in the world? Here I was, young, well, and happy, safe in the midst of those who had known and cared for me all my life. Illness might come of course, as it may come to any one; though this morning, in spite of the terrors of the night, I felt so strong and vigorous, so completely restored by my several hours of sound sleep, that it was difficult to realise this fact as regarded myself. Accident? Yes, accidents often befall those least on the look-out for them, the timorous and apprehensive frequently, like the cracked jug of the proverb, escaping scathless, where the strong and bold are struck down. But still—— and as I lay there reflecting thus, a bright ray of sunshine, breaking through the gray autumn dawn, lighted up one corner of the room. I took it as a good omen.

'It is going to be a lovely day after all!' I said to myself, springing up; 'and I am *not* going to be gloomy. I shall take care not to set myself on fire, and *perhaps* it would be as well not to drive

over to the Weald alone with that new pony this afternoon. Papa did say that he would rather I waited till his return. I may as well walk there and back. A warning, after all, is only a *warning*, not a prediction! Perhaps the nightly rider's visits need not always have been followed by misfortune, if our ancestors had remembered this; and next best to going to papa to-day, which I could not do—what *would* he say if I suddenly drove up to his club in London?—next best to going to him is surely to follow his wishes as closely as possible.'

So I dressed in good spirits, with even a distinct sense of exhilaration. I was pleased with myself for having, as it seemed to me, so triumphed over the troubles which might have paralysed a weaker person; for having brought my common-sense to bear so satisfactorily on the motive and reason of the mysterious visit.

'And to-morrow,' I said to myself as I sat at breakfast alone—'to-morrow Morna will be here. How interested she will be in hearing my wonderful story! And I am sure she will admire me for not being frightened out of my wits.'

I spent the greater part of the morning in writing a long letter to Arthur, for though the mail was still some days off, my letters were often more in the form of a diary. I related to him, as graphically as I knew how, my strange dream, and my still stranger waking experience, of the preceding night,

asking him to be sure to let me know if, at the hour at which I dreamt that I heard his voice, he was in any special way thinking of me or feeling anxious about me. And I impressed upon him that he *must not* imagine that my hearing the rider was also a dream, so entirely and completely convinced did I feel that it was not to be thus accounted for. I did not finish the letter; for, as I have mentioned, there were still some days before the departure of the mail. The last sentence I wrote was promising to add more the next day. 'By to-morrow,' I said, 'the mysterious danger as to which I have been warned will be over, and I think you will allow that your little Meg has shown some sense and courage.'

The next few hours passed very happily in completing my preparations for Morna's reception. She was to have, as before, a room opening into my own, *en suite* with my little sitting-room. But it was fully three years—nearly four, indeed—since her last visit, and there were several changes in the house which I was eager for her to admire. My own domain had been thoroughly renovated; the three rooms—for the second bedroom was always looked upon as belonging to any special visitor of my own—had been repapered and painted, and, in a sense, refurnished; that is to say, papa had allowed me to choose any special pieces of furniture that suited my fancy in the other parts of the house, and thus collect together all I judged prettiest for my own nest.

I thought it perfection; and even now, great as are the changes in taste in such matters, looking back to it all, I think it must have been charming in its way. I remember standing at the door of Morna's room for a last glance before starting for the Weald, and saying to myself, 'When there is a bright little fire burning, and flowers freshly arranged, I don't think any room could be nicer, and I am sure she will think so.'

It had been left an open question between my friends and me whether I should go over to luncheon or not till a little later. There was no such thing as 'afternoon tea' in those days, as we dined so much earlier, in the country especially, six being our usual hour. I had been so busy all the morning that I had not noticed how quickly it was passing, and when I glanced at the timepiece in my boudoir, I was surprised to see that it was already too late for me to be at the Weald by luncheon-time.

'Unless, that is to say, I drive over after all,' I said to myself. 'But no,' I decided, 'I won't go back from what I fixed.'

So I made a speedy luncheon, and started on foot soon after two o'clock.

The promise of the morning had been fulfilled; it was now a lovely autumn day, and my spirits, already at a high level, rose still more. The young, it is said, love autumn best. I think it is true. There is something exhilarating in the contrast between the tired

world gently preparing for its winter repose, and the personal sense of buoyant vigour. I remember feeling this strongly that October afternoon, just as now, in my old age, I love the sensation of the spring, in a deeper and truer way, I would fain hope. For it speaks to me now, through the mystic voice of nature, of the eternal Spring, the life out of death which is at the root of all we hope for.

My walk to the Weald was quickly accomplished. I met Thea just outside her own gates coming to meet me.

'We hoped you would have been with us at luncheon,' she said; 'but, evidently, it was no trouble that kept you back. I never saw you look more bright and blooming, child. Have you had any special good news?'

I hesitated for half an instant in my reply. I don't think Thea noticed it; but in that half-instant I made up my mind not to tell her of what had happened in the night—not that day at least. Why suggest the least shadow of anxiety or apprehension to her sensitive, impressionable nature?

'You forget,' I said happily, 'that Morna is coming to-morrow. I have been getting everything ready for her.'

'To be sure,' Thea agreed. 'It will be delightful to see her again.'

Then we joined Mrs Gladwyn in the house. There were plenty of things to talk about; there always were

between us three. The daylight was already fading fast, when I started up and said I must return home.

'Why are you not driving?' asked Thea. 'It will be almost dark before you get back. I think you had better let one of the servants go with you.' For, since their loss of fortune, there were no longer any horses at the Weald.

'Oh dear, no,' I replied gaily. 'I shouldn't mind if it were quite dark, I know the way so well, and I wanted a good walk to-day.'

So, Thea watching me from the gate, I started homewards.

CHAPTER XII.

AN EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCE.

I WALKED quickly. I have always been an excellent walker, and I was not the least tired. The feeling of exhilaration of which I had been more or less conscious all day had not left me; on the contrary, as the afternoon shadowed into evening it seemed rather to increase. This was no doubt due in great part to physical influences, for nothing seems to me more bracing and invigorating than the first frost; and though it had been, for the season, an almost cold, albeit bright day, it was not till the sun had set that there came the 'nip' in the air, the feeling of 'north' in the gradually rising breeze, which I have always loved—an inheritance, maybe, from some far-back Viking ancestors, who were never at their full strength and energy in mild or balmy weather.

'I am like the celery,' I thought to myself, laughingly; 'always the better for a kiss from Jack Frost.'

And I congratulated myself on having chosen to

walk instead of drive. I felt rewarded for my close attention to papa's wishes.

'For I could not have driven the new pony fast in this half-light,' I said to myself. 'We have never tried him yet after dark, and he isn't like old Frolic, who knew every stone and rut on the road, I do believe. And driving slowly would have been cold.'

I gave a tiny shiver. Even for walking it was *almost* colder than was quite pleasant.

'I may as well take a run,' I thought; but just as I was about to do so, a slight but unmistakable rustle in or just on the other side of the hedge caught my ear. I stood still for a second to listen, but all was silent. I was in what we called the 'Half-way Lane,' a convenient meeting-point for the Weald people and ourselves, especially when on foot; for on one side it emerged on to the high-road, very near the stile through or over which was the short-cut by our own grounds; and at the Gladwyns' end a turn into another lane brought one to the Weald in about the same time. We did not often use these lanes for driving in winter; like all lanes, they had an extraordinary faculty for getting wet and muddy on the smallest provocation, and for remaining in that condition till, for very shame at the sunshine disclosing their muddy condition, they consented to dry up again.

But if the lanes were aggravating for six months or so of the year, they made up for it when the summer came in good earnest. It was always cool

in the 'Half-way Lane,' the trees all but meeting overhead, the hedges so high and full. Many and many a time have Thea and I, or Arthur and I, strolled up and down in the lonely green shade, talking or not talking as the mood was upon us.

I was there yesterday—for, as I sit writing now, the rich glory of the August sun is over my world—I was there yesterday; I wanted to revive my memory as to the scene of what I knew I should have to write of to-day, but I was there this time alone.

I am digressing. I stood still for an instant, as I have said, to listen for the sound I had heard, but all was still. So I walked on again—not running, as I had intended, for a certain curiosity as to the rustle had suggested itself. And again I heard it, and again in a minute or two I halted, to be for the second time met by absolute silence.

What could it be? I was a thoroughly country-girl. I knew all the sounds of the wild yet familiar creatures about, their tricks and 'ways,' dear things that most of them are, and I could not associate this odd sound—stopping when I stopped, beginning again when I moved—with any timid hare or busy little rabbit. A fox it *might* be, but scarcely. Then the notion struck me that possibly, as sometimes happens, the rustle was connected with my own person. Had the stiff lining at the foot of my skirt got torn, and was it dragging after me, or was I attended by a 'follower' in the shape of a still leafy branch?

I examined my garments. No; all was trim and ship-shape, and on I went again—*again*, though not till after a moment or two's interval, to be echoed as it were by the sound in the hedge.

Yes, it *was* from the hedge that it came.

I was not frightened, yet I did not like it. I began to feel indignant. If it was some village boy playing or attempting to play any kind of trick upon me, he should assuredly be pulled up for it, if only I could find out who he was.

'The best thing I can do,' I reflected, 'is to run. I can easily get to the end of the lane before the person behind the hedge, if a person it is, and then he or she or it will find it difficult to hide from me, as the hedge stops there.'

I was a fleet runner, and had the odds in my favour, for dodging along by the side of a hedge at the border of a ploughed field is not rapid work. So I set off at a good pace, in my heart of hearts perhaps not sorry to lessen the distance between my present position and the safety of our own lodge-gates, though this I scarcely would have liked to avow.

And all this time—for some minutes had passed since I first heard the rustle—never once, strange to say, did the remembrance of the warning of danger near at hand which had come to me so mysteriously in the night recur to my mind.

I ran fast, yet, in an instinctive way, saving my breath, so that I should still be able to hear the sound

should it begin again. And it did. After a moment or two's suspense I heard it accompanying, or rather, now, following me, just as before. No, *not* just as before; for 'it,' whatever it was, was now running too, and for the first time there came over me the sickening sensation of fear. 'It' I must no longer call my pursuer; too evident was it that some human being was my unseen companion. True, there was the possibility which had struck me before I got frightened, that the person behind the hedge was only one of the village boys playing me a trick. But this was most unlikely. If I had been seen at all—and seen I must have been, to be pursued—I could not but have been recognised, even in the fast-fading light, and there was *no* boy in the neighbourhood the least likely to dream of startling me in this way. I knew them all, and I knew they all cared for me.

A tramp? The idea was scarcely a comfort. There were not many of the genus that passed our way, and I think we were even more afraid of them in those days than in present times, when their numbers have increased so appallingly that, miserable as are the best, one is forced to own that there are 'tramps *and* tramps.'

'If it is a tramp,' I thought to myself, 'he is probably running after me to beg. I must not seem afraid, and luckily I have a few shillings in my pocket. And, after all, it is safer for a tramp to take what he can get peaceably than to knock me down for

the sake of my clothes. I am glad I have no watch or jewellery about me. I will try to speak bravely and tell him the truth—that this little money is all I have of value with me.'

Afterwards I looked back with surprise at my own collectedness. I thought all this out as I ran—the whole position seemed clear and distinct. It reminded me of the often-quoted experience of persons rescued from drowning: the supreme excitement for the time lends almost supernatural power to the mind.

I knew exactly at what point the crisis would come; it would be at the juncture of the lane and the high-road, for there my pursuer could run no farther unseen. The hedge melted into a very thickly planted little coppice, through which there was no path, though it was actually the border of our own private grounds. Here he must emerge on to the road, which I too, as I have said, had to pass along for fifty yards or so till I came to our drive-gates. Unless, that is to say, he thought better of it, and turned back whence he came.

Good heavens! if he would but do so, if even he would but *hesitate*, I might gain a few paces, though my heart was now beating immensely and my breath growing red-hot in my throat; but I *could* keep up a little longer, and then, oh, how grateful, how *thankful* I should be to find myself bursting open the lodge-door and rushing in to seek refuge and safety with old Fletcher the gardener and his wife! Courage, courage; another five—nay, three minutes might do it.

Alas, alas! as I ran out upon the high-road, and the soft thud of my footsteps in the muddy lane rang sharp and clear on the firm, hard surface of the old Roman causeway, a tall, dark figure, heedless now, apparently, of coming fully within my view, sprang forward too, through a gap in the hedge which I knew was there. I kept my head. I did not break my pace through the start; I ran on, crossing over to the left so as to put a few steps between me and my pursuer, who had been almost abreast of me. And for half an instant it seemed as if this moment gave me the chance I had hoped for. He, or she—I did not even glance at the figure—had not expected it. A sudden pull-up on my part had been counted upon, and a moment's hesitation sent new hope into my heart. On I ran—fast, faster still—but ah! the other was running too now, and gaining on me by great strides. Then came a voice, hoarse and somewhat breathless—man's or woman's I could not have told which; and at first I did not hear what it said; I did not try to hear. All my senses were now concentrating into the one maddening desire to reach shelter and safety. But the voice came nearer, and turned into a sort of whine:

'Won't ye stop, miss, and give a poor woman a penny or two?' followed by some confused nonsense about starving children at home, how far she had run to get a word with me, and so on.

But I neither answered nor slackened my pace for

All my senses were now concentrating into the one maddening desire to reach shelter and safety.

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an instant; I only knew I must run—run; if my heart burst in the effort, I must still run till I got to Fletcher's lodge, and the moments seemed hours, till——

She had overtaken me. There was no whine now, no pretence. A hand with a grip like iron caught my arm and dragged me back. Then, as if in some frightful nightmare, two or three more figures sprang out in front of me from somewhere. The woman's arm was passed round my neck; for an instant I thought she was going to strangle me; but no, something soft and woolly was drawn deftly over my mouth, though not so as actually to hurt me. I could not have screamed had I tried, for my breath was all gone. My hands were drawn back and tied together, firmly but yet not brutally, as I allowed to myself afterwards when I thought it all over. A cloak or some large rough garment was thrown over my whole body, and I felt myself lifted from my feet and carried by more than one person, it seemed to me, some short distance down the road. And all this within a few yards of my own gates, within hail of our own servants! A fit of boiling, furious rage seized me. I struggled violently; I tried to wrench my hands from their fastenings so as to free my mouth; I tried to scream; but my utmost efforts could achieve nothing but a muffled groan. I struggled again in a sort of frenzy, till a voice—not the same voice—whispered sternly and harshly:

'None o' that now. You 'll hurt yourself, but no one else. Keep still, and no harm 'll come to you.'

This made me almost more furious than before, but by degrees my struggles ceased, my strength was all gone, and then I think—nay, I know—I must have lost consciousness.

Not, however, for very long. I revived to some extent, to a sort of mechanical, dreamy perception of what was passing around me, but with this half-consciousness—mercifully perhaps, for no struggles or resistance could have availed me anything—with this half-awakening there did not return violent feeling of any kind. I did not ask myself where I was or what had happened; I did not even say to myself that perhaps I was dreaming. For these strange minutes—how many I know not—I felt, I suppose in a sense I really was, a body without a soul, almost without a mind.

Yet I saw and heard; and, curiously enough, more clearly than either, I *smelt*. At any moment since that night certain odours have had power to recall, as if by magic, the whole sensations of that extraordinary journey.

I was in a large covered van, a carrier's cart I should have guessed it to be; and such, for all I have ever known to the contrary, it may have been, though assuredly not the property of our own faithful old carrier from Bray. It must have been recently used for carrying grain or meal, for there was a strong and not unpleasant mill-like scent, mingled with that of dried herbs, bunches of which, as I noticed afterwards,

were swinging about from the roof. At first I thought I was alone inside, though gradually the sound of voices reached my ears. They came from the driver's seat in front, where—for it was a large van—there was, doubtless, room for three or more to sit abreast. They seemed to be talking in an ordinary unconcerned way, laughing carelessly now and then, and the cover between me and them was only partly drawn. I must have moved slightly, for suddenly a hand touched me cautiously, and I saw bending over me the figure of a very, an almost immensely tall woman, who must have been crouching beside me, watching me as I lay there half fainting. I was not yet alive enough to feel fear, yet my perceptions must have been abnormally acute, for I knew in an instant that this was not the same woman who had run me down.

'She was not so tall,' I murmured to myself; and the figure bent down to catch my words, and then I realised that the muffler had been removed from my throat and mouth—necessarily, no doubt, if I were to revive.

'Hush!' said my companion, speaking very, very low; and though the voice was strangely deep, it was not rough. 'Hush, I beg of you, miss, or they'll be for half-choking you again. Are you better now? Could you swallow a mouthful?'

I tried to move my head in acquiescence — in grateful acquiescence, for now I began to feel more *consciously* faint and exhausted, and my throat was very parched.

'Some water, please,' I whispered.

My strange friend—why did I feel instinctively that I *had* a friend beside me?—moved to the front of the wagon, stooping almost double as she crossed it, and said something to the men on the driver's bench. My ears were preternaturally sharpened, I think. I heard a gruff rejoinder:

'Best thing too—put her to sleep again.'

Then there was a little fumbling and clinking of glass, and the movement of the cart grew slower—not that it had been fast before—and in a moment or two the tall, dark figure was bending over me again, holding a cup to my lips. I sat up a little and began to drink eagerly, but when I tasted the contents I pushed it away; it was not water, but spirits of some kind, and fiery enough, it seemed to me, though in reality it was not at all strong. Then again came the deep whisper:

'Don't be afeared, miss. It's good stuff, and if it makes you sleep a bit no harm will be done; and when you wake we 'll have got—where we 're going.'

'Where is that?' I began; 'and what'—— but a large rough hand touched my mouth gently, with another 'Hush!' followed by, 'Drink it, missie; it won't hurt you. And—don't be afeared. You 're *safe*—that 's true as God 's above us.'

Something made me trust the strange, deep voice, with its undertone almost of tenderness. I drank up the contents of the cup obediently, and then

turning round a little—I was lying on a not too uncomfortable sort of shake-down, of straw covered with some heavy rugs and cloths—I almost immediately fell asleep.

This time it was really sleep, not that miserable half-swooning doze; and though the brandy I had swallowed made my head a little dull and confused when I awoke, still on the whole I felt better, more able to take in everything in a normal manner.

It was quite night now—black, dark night, as far as I could judge. A flaming, smoking lamp was swinging from the top of the van near the front entrance, between the half-open cover—a sort of tarpaulin curtains, beyond which I saw vaguely the outline of the driver. He was talking, unconcernedly enough apparently, and as I listened the words 'Here we are' caught my ears, and I felt the wagon beginning to pull up.

I think I was thankful. I was glad of any change, and if this uncouth friend of mine was really a friend, possibilities—joyous possibilities of escape and rescue—began to shape themselves in my mind.

But all hope of anything immediate of this nature was soon crushed. As the wagon stopped and those in front—two men and a woman I saw them to be afterwards; a good-sized woman, though far stouter than my protector, and whom I strongly suspected of being my original pursuer—got down, the tall woman stepped in again, the others giving way to

her as if by existing agreement. She came up to my corner and helped me to rise.

'Can you stand, miss?' she said, for she saw I was giddy and uncertain. 'If you can get to the front, I'll lift you down and carry you in;' and then came a whisper again: 'Don't try to get away, for the love of God, miss! Trust to me.'

My first rush of hope died away at the words, but I felt it was better to obey. So I let her half lead, half carry me to the opening, whence, first springing to the ground, she lifted me out carefully and carried me into a small house beside which we had pulled up.

I am not a small person by any means. I am still, in my old age, considerably taller than most women of my own and its immediately succeeding generation, though I will not compare myself with the well-developed young women of the close of this nineteenth century. I was a very good height, and strong and vigorous to boot, but in the arms of my extraordinary friend I seemed like a feather. So gently and even 'gingerly' she carried me, too, as if afraid that a jolt or shake would hurt me. I felt like a confiding baby in her arms.

She did not speak. She passed straight through a small kitchen-like room into which the outer door opened straight, into a small bedroom behind; nor did she stop till she had laid me at full length, wrapped up as I was, on the bed.

'Now, miss,' she said, speaking low, though not in

a whisper—any one in the kitchen might have heard what she said had they listened, but I had not been able to see if any one was there or not—'now, miss, try to get some sleep for a few hours. I 'll be close by in the kitchen'—and she nodded towards the outer room—'and the old dame 'll bring you a basin o' bread and milk. That 'll suit you, I hope?' This inquiry was anxiously made. 'The men with the wagon won't disturb you; they 've work to do, for we must make an early start. Now, don't be afraid; if you keep quiet no harm will come to you, and that 's gospel truth.'

'I do feel as if I trusted you,' I said, 'but'—and here I raised myself and tried to see more of the dark face bending over me—'can't you explain anything? What does it all mean? If no harm is intended, why have I been dragged away like this? Where are you taking me to?' and I caught the woman's arm and held it firmly.

She tried to disengage herself, but without roughness she could scarcely have done so. So she stood still and spoke again, soothingly, though very earnestly:

'Miss, I can't tell you. I *can't*. All I can do is to say again that no harm will come to you, and the quieter you are the less you 'll have to bear. Let me go, miss, please. I 'll watch by you while you sleep.'

I loosed my hold of her. Her words did impress

me, and I was too tired to attempt any further resistance, even in the shape of inquiry. The tall woman left the room, closing the door behind her. I rose with difficulty, for I was stiff and half-numbed. I took off my hat and some of my outer clothing, enough to enable me to lie down more comfortably. Then, happening to glance round the small room, I caught sight of a good-sized jug of steaming hot water standing beside a hand-basin on a rickety little table. There was also a clean towel and a piece of soap.

What a comfort! I could wash my face and hands; and I did so at once, with the greatest satisfaction. This little discovery did me good in another way; it convinced me almost more than my unknown friend's assurances that no real harm was intended me, and that to some extent my comfort and convenience were to be considered. Another discovery awaited me when I got into bed. The sheets, though coarse, were not only perfectly clean, but thoroughly well aired, thanks to the presence of an old stone jar filled with boiling water. I almost laughed at the queer inconsistency in the way I was treated; and just at that moment a tap at the door was followed by the entrance of a quaint but not unpleasing-looking old woman carrying a basinful of my promised supper. She set it down on a chair beside the bed without speaking.

'Thank you,' I said. 'Could you lend me a comb,

do you think?' I added, though with some inward misgiving as to the specimen which might be the result of my request, for my hair was terribly disordered.

The dame did not speak, but turned quickly to the little table. There, hidden by the edge of the basin, lay a coarse but perfectly new comb, of the rough kind one might buy at a village shop. She handed it to me, still without speaking.

'What o'clock is it?' I said; but she placed her fingers on her mouth and shook her head. It was useless to try to make her answer me; either she was dumb or she had been forbidden to speak. I have never known which, but I incline to the latter belief.

Then she left me, closing the door carefully behind her, first placing the candle and lucifer-matches—dear me, what coarse, sulphurous things they were in those days!—on the rush-bottomed chair where stood the bowl of bread-and-milk. All these little things conspired to reassure me. Not only were my material needs considered, but my mysterious captors had evidently no wish that I should be terrified or upset more than had been, so to say, unavoidable for the execution of their extraordinary design.

So I ate my supper without fear of its being poisoned or drugged; on the contrary, greatly owing, no doubt, to my being extremely hungry, it seemed to me that I had never tasted anything so good. And then I speedily fell asleep as peacefully as a tired child.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DUTCH LANDSCAPE.

THE gray dawn was creeping in at the small window facing my bed when I awoke. Never in my life have I had a stranger awakening. For some moments I could not believe but that I was undergoing some extraordinary hallucinations. I half sat up and looked about me, and in so doing I perceived that I was only partially undressed. This brought back with a flash the remembrance of all that had happened the night before, and for a moment or two I felt perfectly crushed and overwhelmed by the realisation of my position. And another thought, which my personal sufferings and discomfort had hitherto kept in the background, was now to aggravate my misery: What would my dear ones at home be going through on my account? My father was away I was at first thankful to remember, but he could not long be kept in ignorance of my disappearance; and, after all, was it not to be regretted that he had not been on the spot?

What were a few hours' peace of mind or one good night's rest for him, in comparison with the loss of time in starting any well-organised search?

'Papa is so keen and quick and clever,' I thought. 'Whoever these wretches are who have stolen me away, and whatever their motive, I can't believe but that I should have been found already if he had been at home.'

And then a deeper blackness came over me as the idea suggested itself that perhaps it was a very deep-laid plot, and that my father's absence had been watched for. Then again came a sudden realisation of hope.

'I won't be so terrified,' I thought. 'Perhaps, after all, it is only some detestable, malicious sort of trick, from political motives possibly, to torment my dear father. *Perhaps* they will take me home again to-day! I would promise anything in reason, money or secrecy for a certain time, like the girl in the old burglar story, if *only* I could get away, and then papa might be saved all terror; though at best I 'm afraid the dear Weald people must have had a miserable night — and Morna!—Morna, who is arriving to-day!'

I writhed at the thought of it all; at the memory of my happiness the day before; of my, in a sense, defiance of the ghostly rider's warning. Why had I not stayed safely at home till the fateful day was past? Oh, why?

I was no longer really afraid. I felt quite sure that no real ill was intended me. My predominant feeling was more that of intense indignation and longing to outwit my captors. Was there no chance of escape? I could count upon the friendliness of the tall woman, I felt convinced; but yet she had repeatedly warned me that my best course was submission. No; I must watch for myself and make my own plans, if any opening for such should show; and again I sat up in bed fired with new resolution and courage.

From where I was I could see little out of the window, but as the light increased a gleam of something outside caught my eyes. 'Can it be water?' I thought. I sprang up and went forward to look. Yes, water it was; the little house in which I found myself stood on the banks of a canal. This gave me some vague idea of the direction in which I had been brought, for I knew that the Southford canal passed within a certain distance of my home, though its near neighbourhood was ugly, flat, and desolate, so that we were never attracted thither in our rides or drives. Still, it was something to take hold of, and I was turning to get back into bed again—for the morning was very chilly—when a new complication of my affairs presented itself. On the chair where, the evening before, I had thrown my dress and cloak I saw before me a stout, linsey-woolsey skirt and bodice, such as one of our under-servants would have despised, and a rough shepherd's-plaid shawl,

crowned by a black straw bonnet, all evidently intended for my wear—my own clothes having been spirited away.

A sort of rage seized me, and any hopes of intended release melted into thin air.

'This is too abominable and insulting,' I said to myself in impotent fury. 'Some one has been in the room during the night! Perhaps, after all, the tall woman is no more my friend than the others. What shall I do?—oh! what *shall* I do?'

I lay down again, and determined to pretend to be asleep, with a half-idea that they would not dare to wake me, and that thus I might gain a little time, and delay their taking me still farther away, as I now grew certain was their plan. But I reckoned without my host, or hostess, for in a minute or two I heard the door creak, and the old dame of the previous night came in, carrying again a jug of hot water in one hand, and my boots, beautifully cleaned and polished, in the other.

I pretended at first not to hear her, hoping thus to force her to speak. But this ruse did not answer. I felt that she was looking at me; then she gently touched me on the shoulder. It seemed useless to keep up the farce. I turned upon her.

'What do you want?' I said. 'Why can't you speak?'

She shook her head, as she had done the night before, and pointed to the hot water, which she had

put on the table, and then, though looking rather frightened, to the chair on which the objectionable garments lay.

At this I sat up and faced her angrily.

'If you think I'm going to dress myself in those clothes, you are mistaken! I don't know who you are or what you have to do with those infamous people that brought me here, but you'd better take care for your own sake! How dared you come into my room and take away my clothes when I was asleep?'

I spoke loudly. I was getting desperate, and did not care who heard me. The old woman threw up her hands with a gesture of despair, and ran back into the kitchen, leaving the door slightly ajar. Her voice I did not hear; in fact, to this day I do not know if she had one or not. But even if she were dumb, she must have had some means of communication with others, for the next thing that happened was this: the door opened a shade more widely, and a voice spoke to me through the crevice.

'Miss,' it said, 'for God's sake remember what I said to you yesterday. Be patient and all will come right in the end. It's but a small matter after all, compared to what you've had to bear, for you to wear those clothes. Put them on, there's a dear young lady! I wouldn't deceive you for all the world. I'm advising you for the best.'

The voice, though almost in a whisper, was that of

my tall friend, and again it exercised surprising influence over me.

'Come in, then, and speak to me,' I said. 'I'm too miserable to stand much more, whatever the risk is. Think of what my friends must be suffering about me.'

'If you dress quick and come in here, we can talk while you're having your breakfast,' was the reply. 'I've not forgotten about your friends.'

Then the door was shut-to firmly. My fit of revolt had passed off for the moment, and I was eager to hear what the woman had to say. So I got up and dressed myself. The tragic and comic elements in life overlap curiously sometimes. It was all I could do, when fully dressed in those appalling clothes, not to burst out laughing at my own reflection in the small looking-glass I have forgotten to mention among the luxuries of my present quarters; especially when the whole was crowned by a deep-eared, black straw bonnet, which, except that it had evidently never been worn before, I should have strongly suspected of being a loan from one of the old women at Bray workhouse. I thought it wisest to complete my toilet, such as it was, and thereby to gain all the time possible for the promised conversation in the kitchen.

I tried to say my prayers, but the words brought a choke into my throat, and I was so afraid of losing my nerve that I dared not persevere, though the

effort I had made brought me some feeling of strength. Then I pushed open the door and passed through into the kitchen. I was expected there. The old dame was stooping over the fire, whence came an appetising odour of eggs and bacon. A table was spread with a rough cloth, a brown tea-pot, cup and saucer, &c.; and with her back to the window sat the tall woman. Even now, in what was full daylight, it was difficult to see her features clearly, for over her cap or bonnet, whichever it was, was drawn a black shawl, which shrouded the upper part of her face, and which she never threw back. All I could see was a pair of dark, almost black eyes, a swarthy complexion, and a square, heavy jaw.

'She is surely a gipsy,' I thought to myself; but some instinct prevented my scanning her too closely. 'If she is wearing a disguise,' I thought, 'she has been very good to me, and I had better trust her through and through.'

She had started up as I came in and crossed quickly to the fireplace, stooping her great height; for, indeed, she could hardly have stood quite erect in the room. There she busied herself with helping the old woman in 'dishing up' my breakfast, and when all was ready she drew forward a chair for me, sitting down herself at a little distance, still with her back to the light.

I glanced at the dame. My gipsy-like friend said something to her, and she went out at the front-door.

'Now,' I said, 'are you going to explain anything to me? What did you mean when you spoke of my friends?'

'This,' she replied, and she laid before me on the table a sheet of letter-paper, folded, though clumsily, all ready for the post. She turned it round, and I saw that it was addressed to my father.

'If you will write in this,' she said, 'I give you my word that it shall be sent.'

She held a pencil in her large, brown hand. I seized it, and drew the paper towards me in frantic eagerness to write at once. But she stopped me.

'Wait a moment, miss,' she said; 'eat your breakfast first, for I must explain a little. Whatever you write will be read by'—and she nodded towards the door—'the others,' she added. 'So if you are not careful it may be stopped.'

'But you gave me your word,' I said indignantly, 'that it would go.'

'And so it shall if you write carefully,' she repeated. 'But please eat something first, for you've not much time to lose.'

I had to give in. I ate what I could and as fast as I could. This new emotion had all but taken away what appetite I had.

'Now,' I said when I had finished, pushing my plate away, 'what may I say?'

'That you are well, and well treated. That they must not be frightened about you,' she went on slowly,

as if considering her words; 'above all—if you can bring yourself to say it—beg them to wait quiet for a bit. No use starting the police and making a hue-and-cry. Believe me, it would do more harm than good.'

I threw down the pencil angrily.

'It seems to me you are only making me write a hoodwinking letter to play into your hands,' I said.

'*My* hands,' she repeated. 'Don't say that, miss;' but these words were in a whisper. 'God knows I'm only thinking of what's best for you, and if you can add that about keeping quiet, it'll make the letter's going still more certain.'

So I wrote these words:

'DEAREST FATHER,—I am well and safe. I entreat you to try and not be miserable about me, though I can explain nothing, for I know nothing. I am well treated, and am allowed to write this much. I believe it will be best for you to do nothing but wait for my return, which, God grant, may be soon. I fear any efforts made to track me would only lead to my being taken still farther away. My chief misery is the thought of yours.—Your own MEG.'

I handed this to my companion; she read it carefully.

'Yes, I think that will pass,' she said. 'I will do my best and let you know. I'll make them see that the more natural-like you write, the quieter it'll keep your friends.'

With these words she rose, and going to the door, beckoned to the old woman to return. Somewhat to my surprise, when she came in, instead of busying herself with clearing away my breakfast-things or tidying up, she took out a cloak and bonnet from a cupboard, and proceeded to dress herself in them; then glancing at me, she signed to me to come out with her. There, in front of the house, ran the canal I had caught a glimpse of from my bedroom window; and moored to a little flight of wooden steps was a long, low boat, apparently just ready to start. Two—no, three men were busying themselves on board, and when we appeared one of them sprang ashore and went up to a horse standing on the towing-path, ready to start him. Just then my tall friend came in sight again. She held out her hand and helped me down the steps on to the boat, whispering as she did so, 'Letter's gone.'

A great weight seemed lifted off my heart at these words. They helped to make me more submissive—inwardly, that is to say, for outwardly I now fully recognised that anything but submission was completely impossible. So I stolidly made my way, followed by the old woman, to the little cabin of the boat, where some rough attempt at providing for my comfort had been made. I was not sorry to be under shelter, for the morning was chilly and raw, and I hated to be seen by my captors. I did not even want to see them, feeling instinctively the high improbability of their

being anything but tools in the hands of the perpetrators of this extraordinary plot.

The gipsy, as I called my tall friend to myself, did not come into the cabin. She sat outside, taking no part in what the others were doing, staring moodily before her. Suddenly, as I looked at her, there came back to my mind the thought of that other woman who had first pursued me, and happening to glance through the little window of the cabin at the towing-path, my eyes fell on the man who led the horse. A very small man he was, and a new idea flashed into my brain.

'I believe,' I thought to myself, 'that the beggar was no woman, but that fellow dressed up!' and by a not unnatural process of thought, the suggestion grew and extended itself in a farther direction as my eyes wandered back again to where the 'gipsy' sat in seemingly dejected thought.

Was she, this strange, uncouth woman, in whom I had felt from the beginning such instinctive, though inexplicable, confidence—was she what she appeared? Was it possible that she too was no woman at all, but thus disguised for some mysterious purpose?

Something in my gaze must have had a mesmeric influence upon her, for she suddenly turned her head towards me, her eyes meeting mine fully. For the first time I caught a complete view of her features; the day was clearing now, the morning mists dissolving as the sun mounted higher, and the thin, cold light

fell pitilessly on the dark, rugged face. Then came over me at last a flash of recognition; I knew the face. I had seen it before, though not for a long, long time. My memory worked hard, struggled, almost painfully, for some moments; then I half started up, with difficulty suppressing a cry. I knew who it was at last!

But already the few hours which had elapsed had taught me self-control. One learns quickly in such a school. The old woman, who had not left my side, turned with a look of inquiry when she felt me start.

'It's getting very cold in here,' I said. 'Can't you fetch a little coal?'

She rose at once, leaving me alone in the little cabin. I seized the opportunity and beckoned eagerly to my tall friend. She—or he I may as well now say, came forward and stood in the doorway, stooping his broad shoulders. I stood up and said in a whisper:

'Phil—Phil Blunt, I know you!'

A look almost of horror crossed his face for a moment; then something in my expression, I suppose, reassured him.

'For God's sake, miss'—— he began, but I interrupted him.

'Don't be afraid,' I said; 'I'm going to trust you, though I can't understand things in the least. I believe you mean me well.'

His face flushed.

'God knows I do,' he said brokenly.

'I won't seem to know you,' I said, 'and I'll follow

your advice, if—if—can you give me your word of honour that you will do your best, your very best, to get me safe home again to my father?'

'My very best,' he repeated solemnly. 'If only you knew, if only I could tell you what I've gone through these last few days since I was—trapped into this wicked business. It's hard upon a fellow to have to pay like this for tomfool nonsense when one was a headstrong boy.'

'And can't you explain anything?' I added eagerly.

He shook his head.

'Nothing,' he replied gloomily. 'It would do no good. But, all the same, it's true that you don't need to be afraid. They'll not harm you. Just be as patient and quiet as you can, and—I'll do my best.'

As he spoke we heard steps approaching. It was the old woman carrying a scuttle of coals. It was too late for Phil to hide that he had been speaking to me, and he was too clever to attempt it. So he stood there, leaning against the doorway unconcernedly.

'I say, dame,' he said sharply, 'miss here will catch her death of cold if you don't look after the fire better.'

He took the scuttle from her hands and heaped up the little fireplace. Then he glanced at the sky.

'If the sun comes out a bit,' he went on, 'it'd maybe do you good to walk up and down the deck a little.'

Then he went back to the place where he had sat before.

The sun did come out to some extent later on in the day, and I followed Phil's advice, though I took care to give a wide berth to the three other men, while at the same time I succeeded furtively in getting a good view of their faces, especially of the man on the towing-path, who after a time came back into the boat, changing places with one of the others. His was the personality I disliked the most. There was something mean and malign about him, combined with a sort of jaunty air which at any moment might become insolent. By his whole bearing I saw that he was unmistakably the leader of the band; the other two were commonplace roughs.

About noon the old woman fetched my dinner from some mysterious hole where there must have been a cooking stove. The air had made me hungry, and I had eaten very little breakfast, and the hot stew was really not unsavoury. And so the day wore on, though without further incident or any renewed opportunity of conversation with Phil. Yet there was an undoubted sense of confidence and security in his near presence, extraordinary and inexplicable as it was.

Later in the afternoon I walked up and down the deck again. The country around was quite strange to me. It was still flat and monotonous, as the neighbourhood of a canal often is, though not without a certain

charm of its own, which in happier circumstances would have interested me.

'It must be something like Holland,' I said to myself, as every one does say of such a landscape; 'if only there were some red roofs in the distance, and a few long-legged storks to be seen.'

The sun's light grew yellower and thinner as it approached the horizon.

'To-morrow will be a rainy day, I expect,' I went on to myself; for, like all thorough country-people, I never found the probabilities of the weather trite or unimportant, and for the moment I forgot where I was, or where the unknown morrow might find me. I started as I recollected myself. Was I to spend the night on this wretched boat? It looked like it, for dusk was already falling.

Just then, however, there came signs of a change of programme. The man on the towing-path stopped the horse at a signal from his companions, who then stepped ashore, one at a time, each carrying a bundle; and when they came back I was surprised to see that their persons had undergone a good deal of transformation, one of them being the small man for whom I entertained a special abhorrence. He was now tidily got up in better clothes, and might have passed for an inferior clerk or commercial traveller; and the same change had come over his companion, whom, I now saw, had also been wearing more or less of a disguise. The third man may or may not have been what he

appeared. I cannot say, as after we left the boat I never saw him again.

Another half-hour's progress brought us to the end of this portion of our journey. We pulled up on the outskirts of a village or small town. The size I could only guess at, for it was now almost dark, when I felt Phil's hand on my arm.

'Come along, miss,' he said gently; adding, in an almost inaudible whisper, 'Remember, quiet's the best chance.'

So, though my heart was beating terribly with rage and indignation, and a certain irrepressible amount of fear as to what was to be done with me next, I suffered him to help me out of the boat and up a path leading on to a country-road, the old woman on my other side, and the three of us preceded by the two men who had changed their clothes, the third being left behind. In a few minutes they stopped in front of a small inn, where we were evidently expected, for a rough-looking man, evidently the landlord of the place, said something gruffly as we passed in. Yet here too some consideration had been shown for my comfort. Tea was standing on the table; I was thankful to drink some, and to eat a slice of bread and butter. As before, in the canal-house, I was left alone with the old woman during the meal. Then I heard a cart draw up to the door—an open spring-cart, not a van, this time. We all got into it and drove off at a rapid rate, the landlord, as I took him to be, driving. It is to be hoped that

the horse was a stout one, but it was too dark to see. My feelings at this juncture were almost indescribable. I was boiling with impotent fury, and yet mingled with this was an extraordinary sense of the ludicrous at the thought of my present position. I, Margaret Langholme, to be driven about the country-side in this fashion; going I knew not where; dressed like a charity-girl; in the hands of I knew not whom. Now and then I had to bite my lips to suppress a burst of almost hysterical laughter, which, doubtless, would have been succeeded by sobs and cries of fury. We must have driven about three miles, when we pulled up, this time at a roadside railway station.

My heart went down again, lower than ever. Once in the railway, who could tell where I might not be convoyed to? The train came up almost at once. Everything had been well timed. Two or three country-folk were standing about on the platform. The station was ill-lighted, and no one paid special attention to us. The door of a third-class carriage was thrown open, and Phil signed to me to get in, which I did with my duenna.

'You're coming too?' I said in a low voice to him.

He nodded his head and was on the point of following me, when the other three men drew him back, two pushing past him into the carriage; the third, the man from the inn, a tremendously powerful fellow, holding him by main force.

I heard an oath; Phil had been taken at a disadvantage, in no way expecting this treachery. There was a scuffle, of which I could not see the result, for the train was already moving, and in another moment we had left the station far behind us.

CHAPTER XIV.

A NIGHT JOURNEY.

I STARTED to my feet.

'What is it?' I exclaimed, confusedly. 'Is not he—she—coming with us?'

I was addressing the two men, but I do not know if they heard me. Both their heads were still out of the window at what had been the platform side, and as they drew them in I heard one say to the other:

'Neat that war; very neat I call it,' and a chuckle ensued.

Then they caught sight of me, for I was still standing. Already I had had time to recover some self-possession.

'What is the matter?' I now asked. 'Is the—the woman hurt?'

'Bless you, no!' said the small man, with a disagreeable laugh; 'she's big enough to take care of herself.'

His words reassured me to some extent as to Phil's

safety; though, on the other hand, they revealed to me with greater certainty that this last episode had been no accident, but a prearranged part of the whole malignant plot. I felt convinced, entirely convinced, that Phil had counted upon accompanying us. Nothing would now have had power to shake my trust in him, but these considerations only added to my misery. By a great effort I restrained myself from breaking out in well-justified fury; it was only owing to the remembrance of my one protector's last words that I refrained from doing so. I sat down again in my corner, realising to the full my terrible position: defenceless, utterly powerless in the hands of these ruffians! I almost writhed in my agony. The slight movement I made attracted the old woman's attention; I felt her touch me, and for an instant a stupid flash of hope lightened my black despair. Would it be possible to get her to help me in some stratagem? For quick-wittedness is the only weapon of the feeble. I glanced at her face, and my momentary hopes died. It expressed nothing but dull, half-stupefied fear. Yet there mingled with this expression a look of pity, of which, too, I was conscious in the lingering presence of her hand on my knee. And it did me some service, for this covert touch reminded me of those other words of Phil's: 'They will do you no harm, miss; you have no need to be afraid.'

I tried to rest on these. I said them over and over to myself, till they turned into a sort of prayer. But

yet that night is ever in remembrance ghastly beyond description; for terrifying suggestions from time to time almost maddened me. These fellows had broken faith with Phil, it was too clear! How, then, could I feel any security that they had not deceived him all along?

'They may be taking me to America,' I thought, 'to be lost sight of for ever—shut up in a lunatic asylum, perhaps; for, whatever their motive is, their object is clearly to hide me. And Phil most likely has no idea where I am being taken to, and perhaps it matters little—perhaps I am going to be murdered;' and for an instant the dark idea started up in my mind of forestalling my captors' intentions by flinging myself out of the railway carriage. I might be killed, or I might not—I had heard of marvellous escapes in such circumstances. At worst, I would be out of *their* hands; and I glanced at the door.

I think the poor, terrified old creature beside me had some instinctive consciousness of what was passing through my mind, of the anguish I was enduring, for all through that awful night her thin, wizened hand kept its place, hidden by the folds of my shawl, and now and then a feeble pressure told me that I was not utterly forlorn.

But an awful night it was. As far as I recollect we stopped but twice, and on each of these occasions the window on the platform side was carefully blocked by the two men. I cannot recall any asking for tickets

or communication of any kind with the outside world. I must have dozed from time to time, for I have vague recollections of wild, nightmare-like dreams, though scarcely more nightmare-like than the grim reality to which I woke. We must have travelled for several hours continuously, for the dawn was breaking—it was late October—when at last the train slackened again, and this time the two men stood up, evidently preparing to get out.

We stopped. I did not move. A sort of sullen obstinacy had now come over me, and even when the old woman twitched my arm to draw my attention I took no notice. I gained little by this attitude, for the small man stepped back into the carriage and pulled me forward. I yielded; I knew that there was no use in resistance, and I was too proud to make a scene. I shook his hand off as if it had been a viper, and got out of the carriage alone, allowing the old woman to take my arm and guide me in the direction indicated to her by the men.

We were again at a roadside station. I felt a certain amount of relief at seeing this, for I had had a terrible misgiving that I was being conducted to Liverpool or one of the great shipping-ports for America. Early as it was, a few country-people were already waiting for the train; it was probably market-day somewhere in the neighbourhood. They were talking to each other in cheery tones, and no one took any notice of us as we passed into the third-class waiting-

room, which was quite deserted, the fire even not lighted. I shivered with cold. The small man looked at me, and saying something to his companion, went off, leaving the latter at the door to keep guard over the old woman and me inside. They must have had money to spend, for in ten minutes or so he reappeared with two steaming cups of tea, which he had probably paid the stationmaster to procure for him. I drank it eagerly, and felt the better for it. A few moments later he looked in at the door of the waiting-room again, beckoning to the old woman. We meekly obeyed orders, and followed him out of the station. Just beyond the gate, on the roadside, a spring-cart was waiting. A pleasant-faced elderly man was standing beside it. He nodded good-humouredly to the leader of our party, who replied to him in a much more amiable tone than I had yet heard him use.

'Hope you haven't been waiting long? It's a coldish morning.'

'All right,' the man replied. 'We'll get back quickly. The missus'll have breakfast ready for us.'

Something in the honest hearty tone of his voice revived my impressionable spirits again, still more the glance of the kindly blue eyes in the plain-featured face.

'Now, miss, if you please,' said our conductor; 'if you'll get into the cart we'll make you as comfortable as we can.'

I should have started with surprise at this change of tone had I not resolved to suppress every sign of feeling. I was stepping up, when I felt a twitch of my shawl, and glancing round, I saw that my old woman was holding out her hand in farewell, while some tears were straying down her poor thin face.

'Aren't you coming?' I exclaimed.

She shook her head, but I dared not remonstrate, for a scowl on the small man's face made me afraid of the consequences to her of any objecting on my part.

'Good-bye,' I said as I took her hand, 'and—yes—thank you for being kind to me!'

She turned away with a sort of sob, and then I saw that only I and my special abhorrence were to proceed farther on the journey. But for the confidence which I felt instinctively in the country-man who had come to meet us, my terror and despair would now, I think, have reached their height; for the tone of civility and friendliness in which my captor now addressed me only tended to make me dread him more and more.

They made me sit in front beside the driver, carefully covering my knees with a thick rug. Then the small man jumped up behind, and we set off at a good pace. In any other circumstances I should have enjoyed the drive. Even as it was I felt conscious of a certain exhilaration in the fresh morning air, and as the light grew stronger and some early rays of sun-

shine gradually crept forth, I saw that the country through which we were passing was charmingly picturesque, and the farther we went the more attractive it became. It was a long drive—six miles at least. The first two-thirds of the way were on the level; then came a long, slow ascent; then, comparatively speaking, flat ground again, through thickly-hedged lanes, till at last we drew up at what seemed to be the back entrance to a fair-sized farm-house. The noise of the wheels on the cobble-stoned yard brought a woman to the door. She greeted us cheerfully.

'You're a bit late,' she said. 'Poor miss must be half-starved;' and as the men helped me down she came close to me, as if anxious to assist; though, at the same time, I felt that her eyes were scanning me with eager, though half-timid, curiosity. I took no notice of her; I was determined to commit myself in no way till I knew something of my new circumstances. I followed her silently into a large, beautifully-kept kitchen, where a bright fire was burning, and preparations for breakfast standing about on the stove. But this room was not my destination. The farmer's wife—for such I took her to be—opened another door, disclosing a short flight of shallow, much-worn steps, leading to a small landing. At one side of this a door stood slightly ajar; the woman pushed it open and stood a little aside to let me pass in. A quaintly pleasant, old-fashioned room it was in which I found myself, showing just now to special advantage, as the

long, low window faced the east, where the now rising sun came peeping in. There was a four-post bedstead at one side with white dimity curtains, two or three strips of checked carpet on the floor, a charming old carved wooden press, and an inviting, chintz-covered arm-chair, standing with a little table beside the fireplace, in which logs of wood were glowing redly.

'I hope you 'll find all comfortable,' said my hostess, taking courage, as it seemed, to address me.

I hesitated in my reply. It was all so extraordinary that it made me feel as if I were dreaming—this innocent-looking woman, evidently anxious to please me as if I had been a lodger coming there of my own goodwill, with no shadow of tragedy or mystery in the background; the whole feeling of the place so utterly inconsistent with the extraordinary experiences of the last few days. What *could* it all mean? I decided to be cautious, and checked the impulse to face round upon her and insist upon an explanation of it all, and how she dared abet the infamous plot to which I had fallen a victim.

So I only said, 'Thank you,' and sat down by the fire.

There was a white cloth on the little table.

'I 'll bring up your breakfast in a moment, miss,' she went on rather nervously. 'It 's all ready, for I know the gentleman can't wait.'

'The *gentleman?*' I repeated, in actual bewilderment. 'Whom are you speaking of?'

'Him as brought you,' she replied in a tone of surprise. 'I don't know his name, but he has to catch the train again within an hour or two, and it's a longish drive.'

For a moment my spirits rose. *He*, that little wretch, was not to remain as my jailer, apparently; and once he was safely away, who knew what chances of escape might offer themselves once I had only these seemingly simple folk to deal with? But my elation was but momentary. The rogues into whose hands I had fallen were far too clever to run any risk of the kind; and, added to this conviction, came the sickening sense of bewilderment, of a nightmare-like unreality, though mingled with actual apprehension for my personal safety. Was my brain giving way? Was I dreaming? No doubt the physical fatigue of the long night's journey greatly added to all these miserable sensations. A sort of numbness came over me, which was almost a relief. I felt too tired even to be frightened. I sat there gazing into the fire, dimly conscious of a certain comfort in the warmth and glow, too exhausted to think coherently.

The door opened, and the farmer's wife appeared again, carrying a wooden tray, on which some breakfast was set out, neatly enough. For, with a curious inconsistency which is not, I believe, uncommon in such cases, while too tired to use my reason or judgment in a normal way, my senses were yet acutely conscious of the material trivialities about me; and

the sight of the food made me realise that I had eaten nothing for many hours.

Mrs Saunders—it is more convenient to speak of her now by the name which I soon afterwards learnt to be hers—put down the tray carefully, and then fell back a step or two, her eyes fixed on me with an expression of great concern, almost of fright.

'My goodness, miss,' she exclaimed, 'you do look bad! Do try to eat a bit. Won't you take off that bonnet and shawl?'

She came forward again as she spoke, and gently helped me to get rid of my ugly wraps, murmuring something to herself as she threw them aside, which showed they did not find favour in her sight.

Then she poured out a cup of tea, and tried to tempt me to eat a poached egg of the freshest, with some home-made bread and butter, and I began to feel a little more like myself.

'I am very tired, dreadfully tired,' I said. 'I suppose I am to be left here to-day?'

Mrs Saunders lifted her eyebrows.

'To-day, miss,' she repeated; 'yes, of course, as long as—as you care to stay,' she added, rather confusedly.

'Then if I go to bed and fall asleep—I dare say I should sleep for a long time—you solemnly promise me that no one shall disturb me?'

'I give you my word, miss,' she replied earnestly; 'no one shall enter the room or come near you but myself. And what's more, I'll put the poker by you

to knock on the floor with if you want anything. I'll hear you downstairs quite easily.'

'Then I will go to bed,' I said; but glancing at my dress, another thought struck me. 'I have no clothes,' I said. 'I've not had a proper night's rest since'—— and I stopped short. I was on the point of bursting into tears, and this I was determined not to do at present, not while that odious little wretch downstairs could be told of it.

Mrs Saunders's face cleared. She was evidently glad to be of some service to me.

'I've got some things all ready for you, miss,' she said. 'I knew there would be no luggage coming with you. Poor, dear young lady, having to come off like that. It is hard, to be sure! The linen is in the press; it was some as belonged to a niece of mine long ago. It's all aired and ready!'

She crossed the room as she spoke, and, with no little pride, threw open the cupboard-door.

'Thank you,' I said, the feeling coming over me strongly that it was best to avoid all inquiry or comment till rest and sleep had restored my brain to its natural condition; 'thank you—if you'll take away the breakfast-tray; I don't want anything more. I'm only longing to go to sleep.'

She did as I asked. In less than five minutes I laid my head on the pillow with a feeling of inexpressible thankfulness. There was a pleasant fragrance of lavender, and a delicious sense of perfect cleanliness in

the old four-poster bed, and with no consciousness beyond that of physical well-being, I fell fast, fast asleep, dreamlessly asleep.

When I awoke the room was in gloom, save for the red embers in the fireplace, which must have been replenished more than once during the day, for it was already late evening; and as I lay there, vaguely trying to recall things, the door opened softly and Mrs Saunders crept in.

'I am awake,' I said, 'but I don't feel as if I could get up. I don't want anything, thank you, except to go to sleep again.'

'I won't keep you awake two minutes, miss,' said the good woman; 'but you must take something, or you'll be getting ill. It's all ready on the kitchen hob.'

She hurried off, reappearing again in an incredibly short time with a basinful of strong meat-broth.

'Drink this, miss,' she said persuasively; 'you'll sleep ever so much the better for it, and to-morrow morning you'll be a different lady; see if you're not!'

I half sat up and drank the soup. It was really very good, and I was soon fast asleep again; and this time it was early morning when I awoke.

I believe that long sleep of twenty hours at least saved my reason, if not my life. I always look back to it with unspeakable gratitude, for once I was fully awake, I felt that all my powers had recovered themselves. I was ready to think things out; to face the

position, even if I found it impossible to explain it; to feel reviving hope in my ultimate restoration and present safety.

'They *don't* mean to hurt me,' I said to myself; 'I feel sure that what Phil said as to that was true. Poor Phil, I only trust they have not hurt *him!* How *could* he have come to be mixed up with these rogues? It must, as he hinted, have to do with his past in some strange way, though I am sure his motive was to save and defend me. But why should *I* be a victim to any sort of political plot, if such it is? Can I possibly have been mistaken for some one else of more consequence?' and then I almost laughed at the idea. We were in England, in nineteenth-century England, not in Russia, or even Italy, where such things were not unheard of. Yet—the fact existed. I *had* been carried off from my home, and some motive or reason must exist for so daring a conspiracy. All I could so far decide upon was the advisability of extreme caution. These Saunders's *seemed* thoroughly honest and simple. The first thing for me to do was to find out as exactly as possible how much they knew, or at least what had been told them, so as to obtain their assistance. Till I knew my ground somewhat better, I must not frighten or startle them by any vehement complaints or rebellion. Such conduct would probably only lead to my being still more closely watched, or perhaps removed from their guardianship to that of less kindly hands.

I felt to some extent fortified by these reflections

and their result; so that when, in a short time, there came a tap at the door, I was able to reply, cheerfully enough, 'Come in,' and to add to this a pleasant word of greeting, which evidently greatly gratified the farmer's wife. Her face cleared, losing its anxious, uneasy expression, and her manner became natural and unconstrained on the spot, thus agreeably confirming my intuitive belief in her candour and transparency of character.

'I'm feeling ever so much better this morning,' I said. 'What o'clock is it?'

'Close upon eight, miss,' said the good woman, with a smile. 'You 've slept not far off twice the round of the clock. When my children were young I always knew things were coming right with them, if they'd been ill or upset, once they had a good long sleep.'

'Are your children grown up, then, now?' I asked, acting upon my plan of gaining her confidence.

Her face saddened a little.

'There 's but one of them left,' she said. 'My only girl died some years ago; she would have been about your age now; and one boy was drowned at sea. A sailor *he* was, and such a fine fellow. So we 've only poor Harry left, and not likely as he 'll ever leave us.'

'Why do you call him poor?' I asked.

'He 's a cripple,' she answered; then, as if anxious to change the subject, 'But it 's more than time for you to be having your breakfast, miss,' she went on, 'and

there 's something here that you 'll not be sorry to see, I dare say.'

She held up a parcel which she was carrying, though I had not noticed it before—a brown paper parcel, firmly tied with strong string.

'It was sent after you,' she added, rather mysteriously.

How it came or who had brought it I never knew, but I certainly was very glad to see the contents, which were no other than my own clothes, which had been spirited away during the night from the house by the canal.

'Yes, indeed,' I replied, 'I am thankful to have them. I would almost rather have stayed in bed than put on that horrid dress again.'

'Well, to be sure,' said Mrs Saunders, 'it is scarcely fit for a young lady to wear, but it had to be, I suppose.'

I glanced at her quickly, but judged it wiser to say no more just then.

'Take the things away, please; never let me see them again!' I said; but Mrs Saunders glanced at the obnoxious garments dubiously.

'You might be glad of the skirt for a change some day,' she said. 'It 's very dirty and muddy walking about here in the winter-time.'

'But it isn't winter yet,' I said incautiously, 'and before it is '——

Again the uneasy expression came into the woman's face.

'Of course not,' she interrupted. 'And what 's more, I can easy get anything you want for you. I should have told you so before—that such was the gentleman's orders.'

'Do you mean the man who brought me here?' I asked sharply.

'Oh no, miss,' she replied, looking very confused. 'I mean our Harry's friend. Please, miss, don't ask me any more. You can see Harry whenever you choose.'

'Harry's friend!' I repeated to myself. Dear me! the mists were thickening about me. Surely, surely there was some gigantic mistake at the bottom of it all. 'Just tell me one thing!' I exclaimed eagerly. 'Do you know who I am? Do you know my name?'

'To be sure, miss,' replied my hostess, relieved that I had asked nothing more embarrassing. 'You are Miss Langholme—Miss Margaret Langholme, I think I was told.'

I threw myself back on the pillow in a sort of despair. The theory of mistaken identity would not hold water.

Mrs Saunders looked at me with sympathy.

'You 're tired still, miss,' she said kindly, 'and worrited no doubt—reason enough too,' in an undertone. 'Now, don't think of getting up till you 've had your breakfast. It 'll be ready in five minutes.' And almost before I had time to stop her she had left the room again.

I lay still digesting what I had heard, trying hard to fit it together. The cripple son, Harry, seemed now the person to get at. Mrs Saunders was clearly under the impression that I had not been an altogether unwilling captive, and it was best, at present, not to contradict this. I felt, too, more and more convinced that the only way for me to find out what this family *could* tell was by apparent submission and resignation.

My hostess was very good to me, poor thing. Nothing that her limited experience of the manners and customs of 'gentlefolk,' as she called them, could suggest was neglected for my comfort; and after I had eaten with a fairly good appetite, and found myself once more attired in my own clothes, things did not look so hopeless. I even began to be conscious of a certain fascination in the unravelling of the mystery; much, so very much more than we often realise in our complex nature takes its colour from physical well-being or the reverse.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CRIPPLE.

REFRESHED and inspirited though I felt, it was not long before other thoughts suggested themselves, which I could scarcely bear to dwell upon. My own courage and hopefulness had revived, it was true, but what about my dear ones at home? My father in the first place, of course; though so closely associated with us were Thea and her mother that the anxiety they must be suffering my imagination pictured as scarcely less acute than his. How thankful I was to feel that Arthur at least was spared this misery! And with the thought of Arthur came back the remembrance of my unfinished letter to him, left open in my blotting-book on my writing-table.

'They will be sure to see it and read it,' I thought. 'Papa will search everywhere for any sort of clue, though he will never dream for an instant that I meant to run away. No one who knows my circumstances in the least could entertain that idea for an

instant. There was no happier girl in the world than I up till two days ago—two days ago, or three at most. Was it *possible* that no longer time had passed since the evening that I came hurrying home from the Weald and fell into this horrible trap? I wish I had not told Arthur in my letter about hearing the night-rider. I am afraid that, at the bottom of his heart, papa believes in it, and how could he help it now? I myself can never disbelieve in it again.' And I sat down on the side of the bed, almost wishing that I had felt too ill to get up. 'They would have had to get a doctor in that case, and *something* might have come of his seeing me.'

In certain ways I was peculiarly helpless. I had not one halfpenny of money with me; if Phil Blunt had foreseen our sudden separation, he would have managed to give me some, I felt sure.

'I can't even buy a stamp for a letter,' I thought, 'should I have the chance of writing or posting one. But perhaps, *perhaps* they will let me write home, as they have done so already;' and this reflection cheered me. Till now, at least, papa's anxiety could not have been unendurable, for I had full faith in Phil's assurance that my letters had been posted, and could not but have reached Holme Alders the next morning.

As I reached this point in my cogitations Mrs Saunders again made her appearance.

'Would you like to come downstairs for a bit while

we get your room tidied up, miss?' and then I saw that a young servant-maid, a bare-armed country-girl, was standing in the doorway behind her.

I got up and nodded in consent. The farmer's wife led the way downstairs into the kitchen which I had passed through on my arrival. It looked bright and cheerful in the morning light, but I was fast training myself to quick observations, and I soon noticed that, unlike the usual state of things in a farm kitchen, the outer door was closed, and a heavy iron bar drawn across it. But I gave no signs of having seen this, and, indeed, my attention was soon diverted to a new actor in the drama; for through another door standing ajar came the sound of a halting step, and a young man, leaning heavily upon a crutch, made his way slowly into the room. He was not an attractive figure, but there was, even at that first glance, something pitiable, almost pathetic, about him. For he was quite young, and the thin, worn face told its unmistakable tale of suffering, past if not present; and of suffering, I strongly suspected, mental as well as physical. I had never seen any one look so unhappy and spiritless. He glanced at me, and muttered something scarcely audible, which I supposed to be intended for a greeting. Then, careless of the fact that I was still standing, he dragged himself to the settle near the hearth and sat down, leaning his crutch against the corner.

Mrs Saunders's face flushed a little. She had her

own ideas as to 'manners,' though, as a rule, the absence of them in her son did not strike her. She drew forward a large wooden arm-chair, cushioned, comfortably enough, in old faded chintz, and invited me to occupy it.

I hesitated.

'Thank you,' I said; 'I am not tired. What would do me the most good would be a little fresh air. I should like to go out for a stroll.'

The pink on my hostess's face became scarlet. She glanced nervously at the cripple.

'Harry,' she said, 'you must explain to miss. I will go upstairs to see to your room,' she added, turning to me; and in another moment she was gone, closing the door on to my staircase behind her.

I was determined not to commit myself in any way, so I sat still without speaking. For some moments the cripple did the same. His eyes were fixed upon the fire, so I was able to watch him unobserved. Never, as I have already said, had I seen a face with so hopeless and dreary an expression. It was impossible not to feel pity for him, he was still so young. At last he turned towards me.

'I don't see that there's much to explain,' he said grimly. 'All I've got to say is to tell you what I was told.'

'And what was that?' I asked.

'Just this, that you've got to stay here till you get leave to go, and the quieter you take it the better.'

His words were much to the same effect as Phil Blunt's, but how differently conveyed to me! My first feeling was again one of irrepressible indignation.

'How dare you give me such a message?' I said. 'I am not under any one's orders, as you seem to think. Who are you, or those over you, to imprison me like this?'

I was on the point of speaking more strongly still, but even as the words rose to my lips I began to recollect myself. My best chance lay, surely, in apparent submission. An expression of slight perplexity showed itself on the young man's face. His tone was less surly and even a trifle persuasive when he spoke again.

'I 'm speaking for your good, miss,' he said. 'Of course I knew you wouldn't like it; it goes hard with one not to be free to do as one wishes, but it isn't for me to go into it all. All I've got to do is to follow exactly the orders of those who do know what they 're about. It won't be for very long after all, and we 'll do what we can to make you comfortable while you 're here. You might be in a worse place, and still farther away from your friends; and if you 're not content to wait here quietly, there 's no saying'—— But here he hesitated, evidently uncertain how much it was safe to disclose.

'Can't you speak plainly?' I said. 'Do you mean that if I try to get away from here'——

'You *can't* get away from here,' he said. 'That 's

too well guarded against. But if you made yourself troublesome my people would not like it. They 're soft-hearted, and they don't want to be looked upon as jailers, and—I should have to send word; I have promised I would.'

'And what would happen then?' I asked quietly.

'I can't say. Perhaps you 'd be taken to America.'

I did not speak. He had put in words what was almost my worst fear. I felt afraid that he saw he had impressed me, for again his tone grew more authoritative.

'You know enough,' he resumed, 'to convince you that staying here quietly is the best thing you can do for yourself and every one else.'

I did not contradict him, though what he said only added to the extraordinary mystery of the whole affair.

'And it 's no use,' he resumed, 'no use whatever, your talking to my mother. She can't tell you what she doesn't know, and she means to do her very best for you.'

His tone of conviction, as he fixed his pale, tired eyes upon me, carried strange weight with it. I almost began to doubt my own reason and judgment. Was it possible, really *possible*, that I was being saved in spite of myself from some tremendous unknown danger? I felt persuaded that the strange being before me was speaking the truth, or at least what he certainly believed to be such.

Yes, this last supposition probably hit the right nail on the head. 'He may have been made a tool of,' I thought to myself. 'The ringleaders in this plot must have some hold over him, as I suppose they have over poor Phil. Really, it is difficult to believe I am not dreaming.'

My brain seemed to reel again. I felt for the moment quite unable to cope with it all, unable to decide if any purpose would be served by telling the real facts of all that had happened to me to this young man, or if by so doing I should only be further complicating my position.

'I must think it over,' I said to myself. 'Perhaps something will throw light upon it if I am cautious. For the present, at any rate, I had better give in.'

'And if I follow your advice,' I said aloud, 'and make the best of staying here, shall I be allowed some liberty? I shall get ill if I am shut up indoors in this way;' and I glanced at the bars and bolts. 'I am not used to such a life. And there is another thing I care about still more. Think what my friends must be suffering about me. If I write to them, will you send the letters?'

He had been prepared for this.

'Yes,' he said, 'I shall be able to send a letter from you now and then, if'—he hesitated again; there was something of the feelings of a gentleman about the cripple. I was conscious of none of the utter repulsion for him blunt and scarcely respectable though

his manner was, that I had felt for the odious little wretch whom I looked upon as my real captor—'if,' he repeated, 'I read it first, and you agree to cut out anything I disapprove of.'

I did not reply. He must have noticed the expression on my face.

'It would do you no good,' he went on, 'to forward letters that would certainly only be stopped farther on, and never reach their destination;' and again his tone took the slightly softened, almost persuasive inflexion which I had noticed in it before.

'Very well,' I replied. 'I will write to-day if you 'll provide me with the materials, and I will show you the letter.'

He bent his head in acquiescence.

'And about my going out?' I went on.

'I will see about it, and let you know,' he answered; and he did not appear surprised at this inquiry either.

I glanced at the barred door.

'And in the meantime,' I said, 'do you intend going on living as if this were a jail? It will be rather inconvenient, to say the least, and it will probably give rise to a lot of gossip among your neighbours.'

'We have no neighbours,' he said, 'or as good as none. That's the best of this place,' he added bitterly.

'You have farm-labourers, I suppose,' I continued. 'You needn't tell me that going on in this way would

attract no attention. I know as much about farm-house life as you do.'

I had the pleasure of seeing that my words made him a little uneasy. He sat silent again. There were queer complications of character in this unfortunate Harry Saunders. He rose painfully from his seat. I instinctively stepped forward to help him, but he reached for his crutch, and, with a gesture which might have meant thanks or proud refusal, moved slowly across the room to the staircase door. This he opened, calling out imperiously: 'Come down, mother; I want you;' then he returned again to his place by the fire.

Mrs Saunders, looking rather flurried and frightened, soon made her appearance.

'What is it, Harry?' she said, without advancing into the room.

'Shut the door,' he said, 'and come nearer; I've told miss here all there is to say, and it's best for both you and her not to talk over things.'

'I'm sure I haven't done so, Harry,' she said, in a tone of self-defence. 'Miss will tell you so herself. I've neither asked nor answered.'

She glanced towards me as if to corroborate her statement. I felt a little sorry for her. She was evidently much in awe of her son, poor creature though he was, physically speaking, and mentally too, in some ways, I felt sure, though certainly much better educated than his parents. And as I was becoming

more and more satisfied that my hostess had very little to tell me, and still less in her power as to helping me, I thought I might as well increase her goodwill towards me by shielding her from blame.

'What Mrs Saunders says is quite true,' I said coldly. 'She has explained nothing to me, and she knows no more about me than before I came; not, that is to say, *from me*.'

'All right,' said the cripple. 'Well then, now listen to me if you please. The lady says, mother, that she 'll get ill if she doesn't have some fresh air. We 've got no orders to make her ill,' he added, with a sarcastic glance in my direction, 'and—for other reasons—it 's better to go on living in our usual way. So you can call Yake, and tell him to unbar the door, and leave it on the latch, as it always is, if you'—and he turned to me—'will give me your word of honour that you 'll not try to get away from this place, any way for the next day or two, till it 's settled about how far you may go.'

'You told me five minutes ago,' I said, with a certain pleasure in getting him into a corner, 'that I could not escape if I tried.'

He was too astute for me.

'And so I repeat,' he said. 'I did not ask you not to escape; I asked you not to try to do so. I want to keep things quiet *for your sake* as well as for other people's.'

'Very well, then, if I give you my word of honour,

what amount of freedom shall I have? It does me no particular good for the door to be on the latch unless I may use it to go out by.'

'I'm coming to that,' he said. 'You may go out and stay out as long as you like,' he said, 'if you don't go beyond our own place, and if you promise also not to speak to any one while you 're out.'

'I promise,' I said dryly.

'Then get your bonnet, mother—you hear what she 's promised—and take miss round the farm as far as—let me see—the end meadows on the north side, and the round lane outside our fields on the other sides.'

Mrs Saunders nodded. She seemed to understand these boundaries, though to me they sounded vague enough.

'Do you mean me to go now?' she said. 'There 's the dinner and all the other work to see to.'

'Well, some one else must see to it,' he said roughly. 'I do mean you to go now.'

But here I interposed, thereby, I could see, earning his mother's gratitude.

'After dinner will suit me quite as well,' I said, 'or better. When the door is open I 'll stroll about a little round the house by myself, and then, if you will be so good as to give me some paper, I will write the letter of which you may be kind enough to approve.'

I think he winced a little at this, though he did not reply.

'Call Yake,' he said to his mother sharply.

Mrs Saunders replied by summoning the servant-maid, and sending her out by a back-door to fetch the labourer who rejoiced in the name of Yake.

He was a rough-looking, ordinary clodhopper. I was becoming, as I have said, very observant, but there was nothing noticeable about him, though he was intelligent enough to glance at me with some curiosity, and to give a tug to his forelock as he passed. It took him a minute or two to unbar the door, which was really most ponderously secured; but once it was thrown open I could scarcely suppress a little exclamation of pleasure at the charming bit of landscape full in my view from where I was sitting, vignetted in the heavy frame of the entrance. Far in the distance, or far at least in the still somewhat misty autumn light, ran a range of blue-capped hills, fringed towards their base by a belt of dark forest. Between the hills and us was a long stretch of undulating grass-land, plentifully dotted with cream-coloured specks, which it was not difficult to identify as grazing sheep. Nothing could be more peaceful or idyllic, less suggestive of mystery, suffering, or crime; yet were not all three—two at least of these dark shadows involved in the strange drama in which I found myself forced to act a principal part?

I felt eager to find myself outside, and hastened upstairs to get my cloak and hat. The window of my room was thrown open; the fire was burning brightly; there was a pleasant feeling of care and

attention over it all. In my heart I agreed with the cripple that I might have been imprisoned in worse quarters, and I ran downstairs again almost light-heartedly, cheered also by the thought of the letter that was to be sent home.

Outside, the whole aspect of things had a curious charm. The first sensation it gave me, and indeed it remained the pervading one, was that of intense loveliness. The farm stood on a sort of tableland, though this I did not realise till later on, for what appeared to be the base of the hills was in reality a plateau already at a good elevation. I wandered right round the house, through the farm-yard, which was not large but well kept, to the other side, where there was an attempt at a little flower-garden, though scarcely now deserving of the name. I knew something of horticulture of the older-fashioned kind, and I soon saw that once upon a time some one must have lived there who loved plants and flowers, and knew how to tend them. The most sheltered spot had been chosen for this tiny pleasaunce, about which there was something almost pathetic. It became my favourite spot for sitting out of doors. There was a rough stone bench against the wall of the house, where I learnt to ensconce myself with a comfortable feeling of being unobserved. The view at this side, though less uncommon than that of the front, was more extended. Actually, as I afterwards found, the land here sloped down, with occasional irregularities, to the

sea-shore, but of this I had no idea on my first sight of the place. And here, too, was the same feeling of remoteness and isolation. There was not, that morning at least, any sign whatever of another human habitation, though as I walked a little farther on, to where a ditch divided this bit of garden from the fields beyond, the silence was broken by the voices of men at work on some ploughed land out of sight.

'One might be anywhere,' I thought to myself. 'Out of England, almost in another planet! Where am I? I do wonder. It is difficult to believe that a railway runs at no very great distance after all!'

I did not stay out very long then. I was really, though I was far too proud to own to it, desirous of showing my self-constituted guardians that they might have confidence in my promises; I was anxious also to write what I could to my dear father. For the thought of what he must be suffering on my account returned like a sharp pain, even when the physical enjoyment of returning vigour and well-being, joined to the exhilaration of the delicious air, had cast it for a moment into the background.

As I made my way again to the house I noticed at one corner a small window, which I came to know was that of a back kitchen behind the large one. And I fancied that I caught a glimpse of a white face peering out of it, which was instantly withdrawn when I happened to glance that way. But when I entered the kitchen I thought I must have made a mistake, for

the cripple was still seated where I had left him, doing nothing, seeing nothing apparently, gazing vacantly at the fire; thinking of nothing, one would almost have said.

'It cannot be he,' I thought. 'He wouldn't have had time to cross the room.'

Afterwards I found that, when need was, he could move much more quickly than he chose to have it suspected.

I had come in almost noiselessly, but I purposely opened the door on to my staircase rather sharply. He looked round, affecting not to have seen me before.

'You'll be wanting to write your letter now, I suppose,' he said. 'You'll find paper and pens upstairs in your room.'

I nodded, without speaking, and made my way to my own quarters, where, on the little table, writing materials were laid out. I sat down, leaning my head on my hands, to think out carefully how much or what I could say to my father that would be allowed to pass the censor. For, besides my anxiety to tell as much as I possibly could, my pride revolted at the idea of having my letter returned to me for alterations by the surly youth in the kitchen. After a few minutes' reflection I began to write.

'My dearest father,' were the first words; but I had got no farther, when there came over me one of those irrepressible bursts of feeling, to which, I suppose, all women are more or less subject. It began with simply

pure misery at the thought of this extraordinary separation from papa and all I cared for. I leant my head on the table and sobbed as if my heart would break. And as my self-control grew weaker, the element of indignation again added itself to my other suffering. I felt as if I *could* not and *would* not bear it. It was all I could do to stop myself from rushing downstairs, hurling defiance at that miserable Harry Saunders, throwing my promises back in his teeth, and setting off on a mad impulse of escape. This was the first, but not by any means the last, time that these fits of mingled anguish and fury well-nigh mastered me during my stay at the farm. But gradually my sobs wore themselves out. I reminded myself of my calm, deliberate belief that submission for the present was my best policy, though my tears fell so fast over the paper I had begun to use that I was obliged to discard it for a fresh sheet.

'It would kill papa with misery,' I thought, 'if he saw that my letter was blistered with tears;' and the very idea made me cry again.

I drank some cold water to quiet myself, and bathed my eyes, and then set to work in good earnest at my curiously difficult task.

This is what I wrote. I found the little bundle of letters not long ago among some old papers of papa's, hidden away in a secret drawer of his private secretaire, with some mementoes of my early childhood—a tiny pair of pale blue satin shoes; a flaxen curl or two, labelled

and dated in my mother's girlish handwriting—commonplace little trifles enough, such as most parents treasure, but full of pathos and true sentiment nevertheless, and held too sacred for any eyes but his own; though a different motive, I imagine, had actuated him in the concealment of my poor little notes. The sight of them would probably have made it difficult, if not impossible, for him to carry out what in after-years he came to promise to the perpetrator of the wicked plot—forgiveness. Here is the letter:

'My dearest Father,—This is the first possibility I have had of writing to you again. I am thankful to seize it, for the thought of what you must be suffering about me is the worst part of this separation; and I rejoice to think that it will be a relief to you to be assured, on my solemn word of honour, that I am well, kindly treated, and quite able to bear the banishment from you and my home, and all I care for, if it were for any good or necessary reason. As to this I am as completely in the dark as I imagine you are. In one respect you are happier than I, for you can hear of me. I think I have reason to trust the promises made to me that you will receive this letter, but I am absolutely without news of you. Take care of yourself for my sake till I am with you again. You may have found an uncompleted letter to Arthur on my writing-table; do *not* forward it to him, and, I pray you, do not tell him what has happened, so that he may be spared the added misery caused by his being so far away. If Morna is with you give her my dearest love, as also to Thea and her mother.—Your loving Meg.'

I read this over two or three times, weighing each word as carefully as if I myself were to judge of any possible risks that might be conveyed by it to the unknown conspirators.

Then I folded it up, directed it, and went down again to the kitchen, carrying it in my hand.

'You can read this,' I said, though my blood surged up to my face, as I held it out to the cripple, at the thought of his having the power to pass judgment on what I had written. He took it from me without a word, and read it slowly, with no change of expression.

'It 's full long,' was his only comment when he had finished.

'You said nothing about length,' I replied haughtily.

I could see, and I was pleased to see, that my care had not been wasted. There was nothing to object to but what, under the circumstances, I strongly suspected would fall in with the designs of my captors. It was evident that the cripple was actuated just now by personal spite against me, and this gave me a certain satisfaction. I wished him to feel that I was in no way cowed by him. He did not answer my remark, but held the paper up to the light and looked at it critically.

'You 've been playing no tricks with it, I hope,' he said; 'no writing in milk or anything of that kind? It 'll be the worse for you if you have, for they 'd find it out at once, and no letters could be sent *then*.'

I raised my eyebrows, not understanding his allusion

He held the paper up to the light and looked at it critically.

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to what I have since read was one of the expedients of the ill-fated Mary Stuart in her captivity.

'I don't know what you are talking about!' I said sharply. 'Is the letter to go or not to go? That is the only thing *you* are called upon to consider!'

'Well, yes,' he replied grudgingly. 'It can go. All the same, I think it would do you no harm to speak a bit more civilly. I'm doing my best for you.'

I looked at him, and the sort of pity which I had felt for him at my first glance returned, and this time more strongly. He seemed such a boy, and he looked so miserable.

'I have no wish to be uncivil,' I said. 'For all I know, you are as innocent of intentional ill-doing in this affair as—as your mother, I may say; for one has only to look at her to see that she is a good, sincere woman.'

He muttered something inaudible, but I could see that he was softened. Then a new idea struck me.

'I doubt if you know anything about me,' I said—'about me or my father, who is goodness and kindness itself to everybody—utterly undeserving of this terrible, treacherous treatment. I don't believe he has an enemy in the world!—at least no one who has the faintest reasons for considering himself such;' for as I was speaking, suddenly there flashed into my mind the memory of several years ago, when Jeremy Blunt, in revenge for the injury he pretended to believe that his father had suffered at the hands of mine, had left

our part of the country with boastful threats of a day of reckoning to come.

Harry Saunders had fixed his eyes on me when I began to speak; he was very observant. I felt conscious that the slight modification of my confident tone had caught his attention.

'It's natural for you to put things that way,' he said. 'There's cases where a man has to act like an enemy, when he's perhaps at bottom a friend!'

'What do you mean?' I said. 'I believe you are completely misinformed—deceived for their own purposes by those who are worse than you. Listen while I tell you everything about myself, and then you can judge, and perhaps'——

He interrupted me before I had said more, and his first words destroyed the sudden hope which had sprung up in my mind that the cripple might, after all, be turned into an ally.

'Hush, hush, for God's sake!' he exclaimed, throwing up his hands with a half-hysterical gesture. 'I can listen to nothing. I know all I need to know, and I've sworn to be faithful where my faithfulness is due. There's no more to be said. Your letter shall go, and you will find I keep my word.'

His strange way of speaking only added to my indignation and perplexity. To have to submit to the orders of a poor creature like that, and not even be allowed to state my case, was almost unendurable.

CHAPTER XVI.

'A LANDMARK.'

BUT again solitude and reflection calmed me down. I felt pretty certain that the cripple had nothing in his power; that even if he were convinced of the wickedness of keeping me captive in this way, he could do nothing which would materially benefit me. If he refused to obey the orders under which he was acting, I should simply be removed from the farm and probably find myself in a much worse position; for, whatever Harry Saunders was or had come to be himself, his father and mother were unmistakably simple-minded, honest, and kind-hearted.

There was no use in attempting an explanation of any kind, for my theory of possibly mistaken identity had now completely fallen to the ground. My captors evidently knew everything about me, and had their own reasons for what they had done, and my present guardians were mere tools in their hands. I had seen very little of the farmer himself as yet, but the re-

membrance of his pleasant, kindly face that first morning when he had met us at the railway station had not left me. It had been almost the first glimmer of light I had seen. And just now, as I was turning to leave the kitchen after the fate of my letter had been decided, I was not sorry to see him come in, evidently looking out for his midday meal.

'Dinner not ready yet?' he called out in a loud, hearty tone as he entered. 'What's the missus been about?' Then suddenly catching sight of me, he hastily pulled off his hat and turned towards me with—'I beg your pardon, miss; I didn't see you. It's a pleasant day though a bit chilly.'

'Yes,' I replied cordially; 'it's a very nice day, and the air here is quite delicious. I have been admiring the views on both sides of the house.'

The farmer smiled; he was evidently relieved at finding me so apparently contented.

'It's very healthy here, I do believe,' he said. 'You see, we stand so high. They do say as there's only a dozen or so dwelling-houses in England higher than ours! For the Grayscar Hills over there rise to a good height, and we are about half-way up them, counting from the sea-level, though you'd scarcely think it. They are a branch of the'——

But at that moment Harry Saunders's crutch fell with a loud clatter on the stone floor, and its owner

gave a sharp exclamation. He appeared to have been in the act of rising from his seat. His father turned towards him anxiously.

'Hast hurt thyself, my boy?' he exclaimed.

The tenderness in his tone was almost pathetic. I think I felt nearer to hating the cripple than I had yet done on my own account when I heard the surly ungraciousness of his reply.

'Hurt myself! No, of course not. I know what I'm about, which is more than you do!'

The last few words were in a lower voice and uttered with a covert meaning. Indeed, I almost thought that I caught the sentence, 'Fool that you are!' muttered in addition.

Whether the elder Saunders heard this filial remark or not I cannot say. At any rate he did not resent it, and I, of course, affected to have noticed nothing peculiar in the cripple's manner; but the incident was not lost upon me. I drew from it two suggestions. The first one, which I felt surprised I had not thought of before more definitely, was as to the importance to me of finding out, geographically speaking, where I was; for it was plain that Harry Saunders had stopped his father when he was on the point of naming some well-known mountain range, which would have helped me, to some extent at least, to guess at my whereabouts. The second was the strong probability of my being able, with the aid of a little diplomacy, to extract some information from my host

himself than from either his wife or son. Not that poor Mrs Saunders was more astute than her husband, but she took refuge in saying nothing at all. Furthermore, I was in a sense committed to not cross-questioning her, while nothing whatever had been said as to the farmer personally. I could see that he was a man of chivalrous instinct; it would go hard with him to be what he would consider 'rude' to a lady, above all a guest, and I determined to win his confidence and liking by a cordial and cheerful manner whenever I had a chance of speaking to him, especially when unobserved.

'Yes,' I said to myself as I ran upstairs, feeling again in better spirits; 'it would be a great thing gained if I could find out what part of the country I am in. I might even'—and my heart gave a leap of joy at the bare idea—'I might even give some hint in a secret way in one of my letters;' and visions of possible cipher, or of utilising some of the methods of puzzle-games with which we had often amused ourselves at home or at the Weald, darted through my mind. Harry Saunders's warning against 'playing any tricks' was responsible for the suggestion, and I determined to think it over in preparation for the time when I might conceivably have some information to convey.

'I will keep my eyes and ears well open,' I thought, 'when I go out with Mrs Saunders this afternoon.'

And so I did. It had turned into a fine, very clear

day, all the morning mists having disappeared. I set off determined to tranquillise my companion by showing myself in good spirits and avoiding all dangerous topics, and in this way I soon succeeded in setting her entirely at her ease. I led her to talk of her own affairs, and my life—my habit of friendly intercourse with country-people—here stood me in good stead. For my interest in her simple narration was not feigned; the tears rose to my eyes involuntarily when she spoke in a choked voice of the death of her two children—the young daughter, who, by her mother's account, had been so sweet and pretty and good, though always 'a trifle delicate;' the fine young son who had perished at sea.

'It is difficult to believe,' I said, 'that any one could be delicate who was brought up from childhood in this wonderful air.'

'It is so, all the same,' Mrs Saunders replied. 'There's a many in our parts, in this hill-country, that go off in a decline, though it do seem strange, as you say.'

We were walking along what they called 'the round lane' just then. There was no special landmark in view, so I encouraged the good woman to go on talking.

'And your son, Harry, too?' I resumed. 'I suppose he has been delicate all his life?'

'Oh no!' exclaimed Mrs Saunders, with a touch of maternal indignation. 'He was as fine a baby and

boy as you'd wish to see, and always so forward with his book-learning—more's the pity, I often think. If he'd been less sharp he might have taken kindly to his father's life, and turned out such another. Poor Harry—no, *his* troubles began and ended with that going to London! Many 's the time I have wished his father had stood out against it!'

'Did he have an accident in London, then?' I inquired quietly.

'That was the finish-up,' she replied sadly; 'and perhaps it wasn't as bad as it seemed; it might have saved us worse troubles. But for one as was more like an angel to him in his trouble, Heaven only knows where the poor boy might have been by now. Nought we can ever do, no service he could ever ask of us, could be'—— But here, to my astonishment and chagrin—for I was becoming greatly interested, believing myself to be on the track of some discovery—Mrs Saunders suddenly stopped, grew scarlet with unmistakable fears, while she glanced at me nervously.

I kept my head, and I was really sorry for her. I laid my hand on her arm.

'Don't talk about it,' I said gently. 'I can understand that there are some troubles one can scarcely bear to remember.'

She seemed grateful to me for making it easy to change the subject, and just at that moment came another help in the same direction, though not a word of what had passed but what was carefully stored in

my memory, which has always been an accurate and retentive one.

Before my companion had recovered herself sufficiently to reply, we suddenly emerged from the lane, which here came to an end, and we found ourselves on the open moorland, or, to be more exact, the great, grassy undulating plain stretching away before us from the back, so to say, of the farm and its own surroundings. At some little distance a dark fringe of trees broke the monotony on one side, and Mrs Saunders's first remark alluded to this.

'That's the wood,' she said, 'as we call it. The trees are of no great height; we're too high up for that. But they grow thickly; it's a nice shady place in the summer. You'd be surprised how hot it is sometimes on a sunny day.'

I did not at first answer. I stood gazing before me with pleasure at the view, but something besides pleasure gradually stole in upon me, though I was careful to give no expression to this new sensation.

'It is a beautiful view,' I said, and Mrs Saunders looked gratified. 'One can see a good many miles, I should think,' I added.

'Yes,' she replied incautiously. 'Not far from this we can see right down to the coast.'

I too was betrayed for a moment into incaution.

'The coast!' I repeated. 'Do you mean that we are so near the sea?' and the strange sensation I had just experienced grew stronger—so much so that I felt

my heart beginning to beat with excitement and anticipation.

Poor Mrs Saunders! It seemed a case of 'out of the frying-pan into the fire.' She gave a kind of gasp.

'I'm not partial to the sea,' she murmured. 'It's been no friend to me or mine.'

I let her think that her transparent evasion had deceived me. At all costs I must prevent her getting frightened and relinquishing the rôle of companion to me in my walks.

'Don't talk about it, then,' I said. 'I seem rather unlucky. I don't mean to remind you of sad things. Tell me about the wood over there. Are there primroses to be found in the spring? I do love primroses.'

Her face brightened again.

'So do I,' she said; 'and as for my Netty—that was the pet name we called her by—there was no flower that came up to them with her! Partly perhaps because they're something rather rare with us! There's just one corner of the wood, the most sheltered, where they do well; though they're later than in most places, as is natural.'

'I wish it were spring now,' I said, with a sigh.

I scarcely knew why I said it. I had certainly no wish to remain at the farm long enough to gather primroses in that wood; and yet as we turned homewards again I stood still for a moment and looked at it fixedly.

'I *must* get there as soon as possible,' I thought, 'and satisfy myself if there is anything in this new idea of mine.'

Mrs Saunders naturally imagined I was admiring the view.

'I wish we could go a bit farther,' she said, 'but we've come as far as Harry spoke of.'

I was too much in earnest to feel irritated at this reminder.

'Don't you think we might go a little bit farther some other day?' I suggested. 'I do love woods so, at all seasons of the year. You will be able to tell—your son'—and here I had to shake down my indignation again—'that you found me quite easy to manage. I've not given you any trouble, have I?'

My companion flushed slightly at this.

'No indeed, my dear,' she said impulsively; adding quickly: 'I beg your pardon, miss, for making so free. No indeed; it's been quite a pleasure to me to have a walk with you, and I'm sure,' she went on, growing more courageous, 'one needs but to look in your face to see that one can trust your word.'

I felt glad of this, though at the same time I determined to be very patient. During the next few days the programme of this first one was pretty nearly repeated as regarded my movements. I was allowed to stroll about round the farm in the mornings, much as I pleased; and in the afternoon Mrs Saunders always accompanied me in a walk. Luckily for me,

the weather continued fine and dry; if it had been otherwise, time would have hung terribly heavy on my hands. Even as it was I begged the farmer's wife to give me some occupation; and when she found that I really wished it, and that I was by no means ignorant of many of the things that engaged her own attention, she good-naturedly gave over to me some charge of the poultry-yard. I have always loved poultry, and Mrs Saunders had some good kinds, and was delighted with certain new ideas of mine as to the feeding and rearing of some late broods which required special attention. There were young turkeys, too, fattening for Christmas, which, I flatter myself, were much indebted to my kindly offices, or rather, poor things, it is to be hoped their purchasers were. And I loved pottering about the cow-houses at milking-time, and now and then taking a hand in the dairy. In this way the mornings passed not too monotonously. I was too restless, too much on the alert to watch what was next to come, to have remained quietly in my room, and each morning when I saw the sky clear and unclouded I felt unspeakably thankful. But the later hours of the day were miserably wearisome. There was not a book in the house that I could discover, or else they were purposely kept out of my way, for fear, perhaps, of my tearing off the margins and writing on them, on the chance of getting some outsider to post such missives to my home. Paper and pens, I need hardly say, had disappeared from

my room the very day on which I had written my letter.

After a day or two I begged Mrs Saunders to give me some sewing or knitting to do.

'I really can't stand the long evenings up here with nothing to do,' I said to her. 'I can knit very well and quickly if you can get me some wool. There must be a shop somewhere near here where you've got my other things from.' For no difficulty had been made as to procuring for me the clothes I had made a list of, to supplement the resources of the 'press' in my room.

Mrs Saunders considered.

'I think we could get some nearer than that,' she said; 'at'—— but here she stopped in her usual awkward way.

'Can't we go there when we're out?' I said; but she shook her head.

'It doesn't lie that way,' she answered ambiguously. But, however and wherever procured, the next day found me in possession of some skeins of wool and suitable knitting-needles. The sight of them cheered me a little, and the occupation came none too soon, for the very next morning, to my inexpressible dismay, I woke to a dark, cloud-covered sky and pelting rain.

'Just,' I thought to myself, 'when I was beginning to hope I might get leave for a longer walk and explore that wood.' For my mind had never ceased

dwelling night or day on the possibility that had suggested itself.

The rain, too, put a stop to another hope. I had always been watching for an opportunity of speaking unobserved to the farmer himself, but hitherto such had not presented itself; perhaps the good man had kept out of my way on purpose. I cannot say.

The rain lasted for two days without intermission. I have rarely seen such a steady pour, and in hilly districts it is, I believe, uncommon—so, at least, Mrs Saunders assured me when she saw how I was longing for it to cease. When she came into my room on the morning of the third day, she gave me the welcome news that the clouds were breaking.

'It really looks lighter,' she said. 'I shouldn't wonder if it quite clears up after dinner, and then we can have a nice walk again.'

Her hopes were fulfilled. By noon the rain had completely stopped, and by two o'clock blue sky predominated, and even some rays of pale sunshine began to straggle out.

I almost laughed at my own delight when I found myself out of doors again.

'There must be something of the gipsy about me,' I thought. 'I could really imagine a prisoner dying, however kindly treated, from nothing but the mere fact of being imprisoned.'

'Can't we keep out of the lanes to-day?' I said to my companion. 'I want to get all the fresh

air I can'—for with the rain the weather had grown milder again, close, and almost 'muggy'—'and they are sure to be terribly muddy.'

'That they will be,' said Mrs Saunders. 'The sooner we get on to the open road the better.'

It was pleasant and breezy on what she called the open road, though, strictly speaking, it was scarcely more than a cart-track across the moor. Here, too, the ground dried up quickly; even the short, thymy grass scarcely felt wet. We walked rapidly, and were soon at the point whence, by the round lane, I had first caught sight of the wood. I kept talking to Mrs Saunders as we went on, and she did not notice that we had by some little distance passed our usual limits; that we were, in fact, but a short way from where the trees began, when she suddenly stopped short.

'Oh, we must be turning here!' she exclaimed. 'I didn't know we had come so far!'

'It doesn't matter,' I said carelessly. 'I am not in the least tired.' But my companion's face did not relax.

'You're forgetting, miss'—— she began, but I interrupted her.

'Nonsense,' I said; 'I'm not forgetting anything. I promised your son that I would not think of running away for the first few days; and I have no intention of now doing so. I think he is satisfied as to that. And if we had thought of speaking of

it, I 'm sure there would have been no difficulty about my going into the wood.'

But I doubt if I should have prevailed had the good woman not been startled at that moment by some heavy raindrops falling on her face.

'There now,' she said, 'I do believe it 's beginning again, and no shelter between us and the farm. I hope you don't take cold quickly, miss, for it looks as if it might be a heavy shower.'

I hesitated.

'I shouldn't like to get thoroughly wet, I must say,' I replied truthfully. 'The only thing I 'm afraid of is a sore throat. But if it is only a shower, why not shelter in the wood? We can be there in ten minutes;' and I set off running as I spoke, closely followed by poor Mrs Saunders.

I could scarcely help laughing at her red face and short breath when she came up to me, for after a moment or two I stood still to let her do so, having no wish to alarm her. We were almost at the entrance of the wood by this time, and a few paces more brought us well under the shelter of the trees, still pretty thickly covered with leaves.

I looked about me with satisfaction. Every moment was increasing my secret hopes.

'We can walk quietly now,' I said. 'Dear me, it 's wonderfully dry here, considering the heavy rain there has been! It *is* nice to be in a wood again!'

Mrs Saunders was slowly recovering her breath and equanimity.

'Whereabout do the primroses grow?' I asked.

She glanced round her. 'A little farther on,' she replied. 'As we are here, we may as well stroll about. I don't think the shower will be much; but I can't have you getting a bad throat, miss—Harry would make a to-do.'

I was not much impressed by my cripple jailer's regard for my well-being. But I was quick to trade upon it, nevertheless.

'My throat is bad sometimes,' I replied. 'It isn't cold that makes it so; I can stand cold much better than damp.'

Almost as I spoke a faint sound broke on my ears. I stood still, my heart beating fast, while I felt my cheeks paling with excitement.

'What is that?' I said breathlessly. 'Do you hear it, Mrs Saunders? Is there running water in this wood?'

'Yes, to be sure,' she replied simply. 'There's a little stream there runs right down farther on, and outside the wood it's joined by another larger one, and the two together make a beautiful waterfall. But,' with a sudden misgiving, 'it's too far for us to go to to-day, any way.'

I had no wish to go so far. I was now all but certain that a very few paces further my hopes would be realised. I stood still, affecting to listen to the

murmur of the brook, in reality doing my utmost to recall exactly whereabouts lay *the* spot I was so feverishly anxious to identify.

'To the left it must be,' I said to myself, and I walked on without speaking. For a moment or two I don't think I could have spoken.

There, among the trees, was the small clearing which I had anticipated. Mrs Saunders took advantage of it to lift her face skywards to see if the rain had left off. I, for my part, took advantage of her absorption to glance round and move quickly to a certain tree a few feet off.

Yes; there it was—the carving on the bark, though somewhat overgrown, still quite recognisable. There they were—the interlaced letters—the double M's. I knew where I was!

My cheeks were glowing with triumph, but I do not think Mrs Saunders noticed it.

'The rain has stopped,' she said.

'All right,' I replied quietly. 'The sooner we get home the better.'

CHAPTER XVII.

FROM THE ENDS OF THE EARTH.

MY excitement made me feel as if I were treading on air all the way back to the farm. Mrs Saunders was not of an observant nature, otherwise she could scarcely have failed to notice my abstraction and random replies to the hopes that the rain would keep off, that I should not get a sore throat, and so on. My mind was working hard at the problem of how best to utilise the wonderful knowledge I had obtained. I was no longer bound by any promises not to try to escape, for the cripple had only exacted it for the first few days, thinking that after their expiry some organisation would be at work to prevent my doing so. Though this, for all I knew, might have had no real foundation. I had given in to his conditions because, in my utter ignorance of the country where I was and my penniless state, I realised that any such attempt was most unlikely to succeed, and would most probably have ended in my being sent

still farther away, and finding myself in much worse quarters.

But now all this was changed. Why should I not try to escape? Two or three hours' quick walking would bring me to where, doubtless, I should still find the old inn, where we had been so happy, and the Lennox family, who would recognise me and at once believe all I had to tell, however extraordinary. So all my energies of thought were now directed towards this end—escape. There was much to consider. Some delay would be safer than hasty action. I knew myself to be quick-witted and resourceful, and certainly not wanting in courage with such a goal before me; and the two or three hours that I spent in my room after I came in passed like minutes in the intense interest of the various plans which suggested themselves. But, alas! disappointment awaited me. When Mrs Saunders brought up my tea I saw that the poor woman was looking terribly discomposed, almost as if she had been crying.

'If you please, miss,' she said tremulously, 'Harry says will you slip down to the kitchen when you've finished, as he wants to speak to you?'

'What's the matter?' I said coldly. It irritated me to see her terror of the miserable little creature.

'Oh! I can't tell you, miss,' she replied, 'I'd best say nothing, or I'll only make things worse for you and for us all.'

'Very well,' I said, 'I'll come down to the kitchen;'

and I finished my meal quickly, though feeling, perhaps, more curious than apprehensive.

'What have you got to say to me?' I demanded stiffly as I entered the kitchen, advancing to the table, by which I stood, at some distance from the cripple, who was in his usual place by the fire.

'Just this,' he replied, 'that you 'd better take care what you 're about! Mother had no business to stay out so long this afternoon, or to let you go so far!'

I did not answer. My silence irritated him.

'Do you hear what I say?' he went on almost rudely. 'You gave me your promise; have you forgotten that?'

'No,' I said, 'I have not forgotten it. I promised not to try to escape for two or three days; and though that time is long past, I haven 't tried to escape at all. You gave me to understand you would make further arrangements to ensure my captivity after that, but I believe that was an empty threat. I might have been away any day—this very afternoon—if I had chosen to risk it.'

He gave a half-laugh.

'Risk it,' he repeated. 'You 'd have been running your head into'—— but here he stopped.

'If you want me to listen to you,' I said, 'leave off those vague threats, and tell me plainly what you want.'

'I want you to renew your promise,' he said abruptly.

My heart went down. Was the unexpected success of the afternoon to be futile after all? How unlucky that we should have stayed out so late! And yet but for that my discovery would not have been made. I was not going to give in without a struggle.

'And what if I defy you,' I said, 'and refuse to promise anything of the kind?'

'You would then be made to stay in your room till those came who would take you farther away. You can see for yourself it would be easily enough managed—a lady like you *couldn't* get away if we were on our guard to prevent it.'

There was a touch of something like appeal, as well as evident sincerity, in his voice. He was not a ruffian after all; he did not wish any bodily harm to come to me; and I think the idea of my being shipped off to America, or some ghastly possibility of the kind, which had been held over him should his guardianship prove insufficient, really distressed him. His manner impressed me in spite of myself. A sort of despair seemed closing around me. Suddenly a flash, as of supernatural light, darted into my mind.

'What I mind the most in all this extraordinary business,' I said, 'is, as you know, the anxiety my friends are in. I can bear it all for myself, believing as I do your assurance'—'and that of poor Phil,' I added in my own mind—'that it will not go on for long. So, if I do renew my promises, what

will you do to soften my wretchedness about my friends?'

'You may write to them, as you've done already,' he replied without hesitation.

'And you give me your word of honour,' I resumed, 'that my letters shall be sent and received?'

'Yes,' he replied, 'once I have read them. There are other reasons, which I don't need to tell you, which make it most unlikely that they would not be sent; that's to say, if you write discreetly.'

I had a shrewd suspicion as to the nature of the reason he alluded to. I strongly suspected that the mysterious beings who were pulling the strings of our affairs at that time would exert themselves to the utmost to stop active measures for my recovery on the part of my friends.

'How often can I write?' I inquired.

He considered.

'It's getting on for a fortnight since I sent your letter,' he replied. 'I'll see that another goes some time next week. To-day is the 14th of November; you may have it ready for the 20th;' and with this I was forced to be content.

I went upstairs disappointed and not a little depressed, but yet with a fresh hope springing up in my heart. I had neither pen, pencil, nor paper in my room with which to experiment; for, as will be suspected, everything I could now build upon depended on the letter I looked forward to writing.

How many times that letter was written in my mind I should be afraid to say. All my powers of invention and ingenuity were concentrated on the composition of the fateful lines, till at last my common-sense warned me that I must beware of allowing this letter to become an *idée fixe*, and finding myself unable to execute it wisely when the time came for its actual production.

Those few intervening days were very trying; my walks were restricted more than hitherto in spite of my promise. There would not have been a possibility of my visiting the wood again, even if I had wished to do so; but this I scarcely regretted; it would only have been tantalising. I never had the least chance of a word alone with the farmer, and this I now became certain was intentional, and it made me the more inclined to think that I might fall back upon the good man, should it become possible to do so, in great emergency.

On the morning of the 19th Mrs Saunders brought up with my breakfast a sheet of letter-paper, pen, and ink, as before. I made no remark about it for her to hear, but I said to myself, 'One sheet! What if I make a mistake? He might refuse me another, or insist on seeing what I have written! It would be very risky to suggest the idea of my writing with great premeditation. I must be excessively careful!'

I looked about me. What was there I could utilise for a first copy? Nothing? Nay! What could be

better than one of the smoothest planks of the well-worn floor? I could easily blur it out afterwards. So I knelt down and set to work as soon as I had had some breakfast and the room had been arranged for the day. It was raining again, but this I did not mind.

After various attempts I reverted to simplicity as, after all, the least likely to draw attention in the one quarter, while quite *as* likely to attract it in the other. And here again I am able to copy from the original letter, still in existence:

'DEAREST FATHER,—I write a second time to assure you that I am well, and suffering in no way, except in being separated from you and my home, and all I care for. My one comfort is feeling that my letters will satisfy you as to this. I do my best to be patient, and to look forward to being with you again before long—before, I trust, you will feel obliged to let Arthur know of this little-looked-for trouble. I hope that you are a great deal with the dear Weald people, as they will be your best comfort. Give them my fondest love, and tell them not to be too unhappy about me. I wonder if Morna is still with you, or if she has gone home. In either case I beg you to give her a special message from me. My fondest love to her too, and beg her to try to find the double "M's," which more than ever I ask her to associate with me and past happy days, which may come again!—Your loving daughter, MEG.'

This was the best I could do, after innumerable

mental corrections and alterations, discarding the elaborate monograms I had placed upon the floor in imitation of the carved letters on the tree.

When my letter was completed I took it downstairs.

'This is what I have written,' I said, holding it out for the cripple's scrutiny.

He read it carefully; then, as I was anticipating, a perplexed expression came over his face at the ending.

'What does this mean?' he asked curtly—'double M's?'

'I scarcely see that I need tell you,' I replied curtly. 'But if you want to know, it refers to the initials of myself and my friend Miss Sweyne, which we carved on a tree some years ago when we were children. You must see that I have tried to write carefully, far more so than it is possible for me really to tell!'

He gave a sort of mutter of acquiescence.

'You can leave it,' he said; 'I 'll see that it goes;' and with a deep, inward sigh of thankfulness—for, as I think I have said before, Harry Saunders made me feel as if I could trust his word in this matter—I went back to my own quarters.

Now began what was in some sense perhaps the most trying part of my captivity, the waiting to see if the definite hopes I was now building upon should prove to have any foundation. I made my calculations a dozen times in an hour as to the probable time which must elapse before the letter would reach my father's

hands, and then, after it had done so, how long it would be before my message could be delivered to Morna. I think I had no misgiving but that it would at once convey to her some covert meaning, though it might take some thought and consideration to arrive at a correct interpretation of my allusion. For Morna was very quick, and gifted to the full with a woman's power of intuition; only so much depended on the manner in which my message would be conveyed to her. If repeated at second hand it might lose its whole point; but unless she were still at my home, or possibly at the Weald, was it probable that she would see my letter itself? Still more, I could be by no means certain that my father was at the time at Holme Alders; it was too probable that he would be scouring the country in all directions in search of me. He might be in London employing detectives, and acting under their advice. There was no saying what might have happened during the last three weeks, and when these miserable thoughts occurred to me my heart sank again into the depths of depression. Still, I reminded myself it was most likely that, having once received a communication from me, my father would have taken measures to have forwarded to him at once any letter which might come, and with this consideration my hopes revived again.

And thus over and over again I went through the same tantalising train of thought. I have often wondered since that the mental strain did not turn my

hair gray. And this terrible time of suspense lasted long enough for me to begin almost to despair; to fear that, after all, Harry Saunders, or those behind him, had played me false about my letter, or that the hint I had so built upon had failed in its purpose.

Fully a week had elapsed, a week which had seemed to me like a year. Each day passed in unvarying monotony. The weather was dry again, but very cold. In my nervous state every small discomfort told doubly upon me. I seemed to be losing energy; I scarcely cared to leave my room, except when a passing flash of hope made me try to persuade Mrs Saunders to extend our walk in the direction of the wood. But I could never get her to venture farther than the end of the lane, where, on the pretext of admiring the view, I stood gazing before me as long as she would let me, only to turn again with an unreasonable feeling of bitter disappointment; for what I expected I scarcely knew. Anything like the isolation in which the Saunders family lived I had never before pictured to myself. I felt quite startled one morning when, on crossing the yard on my way to the piece of deserted garden, I found my hostess engaged in brisk discussion with a stranger, a woman simply dressed and carrying a basket, evidently in quest of some of the farm produce.

Mrs Saunders was expatiating volubly on the excellence of her butter and eggs, and assuring the stranger that, if she let her have any instead of

sending them to market, it would only be as a great favour.

I stood still for a moment out of a sort of curiosity. I could not clearly see the woman's face, but I heard her voice in reply thanking the farmer's wife civilly for her good-nature. Something in its tone struck me as familiar, and I made a little détour so as to pass closer to her. As I did so she turned sharply, and I had almost screamed aloud, when the cripple's face at the window recalled, fortunately for me, my self-possession, and I continued my way without betraying my feelings. But when I got to the stone bench I almost fainted. My heart was beating furiously; my limbs were giving way under me; for I had recognised the woman, and—blessed certainty!—her glance had shown me that the recognition was mutual: it was Mahlah Lennox!

She made no attempt to follow me, and in a few minutes I heard the two women bidding each other good-day. But, for my part, I remained where I was, feeling sure that this was my best course to pursue. The girl was evidently acting under instructions, and I must follow her lead. So I sat still for some time—the day was rather mild—then strolled about in my usual way, and returned to the house as if nothing had happened; though I felt the cripple's eyes upon me, with, it seemed to me, special scrutiny. And all the time a voice in my heart was singing for joy! My letter had done its work. I began again to

hope; something would come of it. I could be patient now.

But the strain had been almost too great. I could scarcely eat my dinner, and felt so weak and tired that when Mrs Saunders came to fetch me for my usual walk I was more than half inclined not to go. But on second thoughts I summoned back my energy.

'I don't care to go far,' I said. 'I have not been sleeping well lately, and I am very tired.'

The good woman looked at me anxiously.

'A little walk won't do you any harm,' she said. 'You needn't go a step farther than you like; but it 's a nice day.'

And somehow, once outside again, I felt better. Mrs Saunders was very kind, and pleased at the result of her advice; and, after all, we made the usual tour, stopping at the end of the lane for my wonted gaze in front of me.

In spite of the new hopes that had sprung up in my heart, I must have been looking ill, for as I turned I saw that Mrs Saunders's eyes were fixed upon me with a troubled expression.

'I do hope, miss, you 're not beginning with a cold,' she said; 'you do look so white and peaky!'

I laughed a little.

'Oh no,' I replied. 'You needn't be afraid. I don't feel as tired as I did. I could walk as far as the wood if you 'll come;' and I glanced again in its direction.

As I did so I caught sight of something moving—something, or some one, that had just emerged from the shade of the trees. Could it be Mahlah again? I stood still and went on talking to detain my companion, whose sight, luckily, was not so keen as it had been.

'Do come a little farther!' I repeated; but she was obdurate, and perhaps irritated a little at my persistency. She turned down the lane again, instead of directing her steps homewards across the open.

The lane, as I have said, was thickly hedged, and sank a little below the surrounding level; it twisted about, too, just where we were, so that any one behind was not immediately visible. But as I reluctantly followed Mrs Saunders, walking as slowly as I could, and talking so as to distract her attention from my doing so, it was not long before my ears caught the sound of rapidly advancing footsteps. I tried my best to slacken our pace still more, till I heard the person behind approaching very near to us. But still the necessity for self-control was upon me! If it were Mahlah again I must not be the one to act first, or to seem on the look-out for anything. I was glad when Mrs Saunders suddenly stopped, exclaiming as she did so:

'Who can that be? There's some one coming after us!' and in her mingled fright and surprise, she caught hold of my arm and held it fast.

Not so fast, however, but that, with one sudden

effort, I wrenched myself free; for—almost before it was possible for my bodily eyes to see him—I knew who was coming. I felt it; and, with a little cry, I rushed forward into safety, into unutterable thankfulness—into Arthur's outstretched arms! For it was he and no other. From the ends of the earth 'my boy' had come to rescue me!

With a little cry, I rushed forward into Arthur's outstretched arms!

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CHAPTER XVIII.

WHAT HAD BEEN HAPPENING ELSEWHERE.

I MUST now for a time alter the style of my narrative. I must cease to follow my own experiences, while I return to the date at which my cruel captivity began, and relate from that point what had been happening among my friends.

These details will not be without interest; for, indeed, they will be naturally expected by those who up to now have followed with patience an old woman's story of her youthful days, of a girlhood so happy and protected, till suddenly overwhelmed by one of the strangest events which have ever come within my own knowledge as happening to an English girl in this nineteenth century, in our own law-abiding country.

It will be remembered that my father had left home a day or two before my capture. There was nothing remarkable in this, as he was often in the habit of going up to London on business, and I had

felt no special interest in this short absence of his, little suspecting the primary motive which had taken him away just at that special time. The fact was, that the last mail had brought him a private letter from Arthur, telling of the strong probability of his leaving for England by the next mail, and asking my father, if he should be in London at the time, to meet the boat at Southampton on the chance of meeting him, as there were business matters of importance he was anxious to discuss with him. What these matters were I shall tell presently. He charged my father not to speak to his own people or to myself of his possible return, being anxious to spare us the risk of disappointment.

My father did meet the boat, and, to his delight, Arthur's face was one of the first he saw; and the two came up to London together, intending to remain there a day or two to give Arthur time to report himself at headquarters, and to learn more definitely the proposal awaiting him there as to which he was desirous of obtaining my father's opinion.

The position he was placed in was this. His present mission home was an entirely unexpected one, as had, indeed, been his last visit, and his employers now proposed to give him a more responsible and lucrative post in Calcutta on condition of his pledging himself to remain there, health permitting, for five years, with but small prospect of any return to England during that time. My father must have looked grave, I

think, when he heard this. There were few things he dreaded more than my going to India, and yet there was very much to be said on the other side. He was the last man to approve of an idle life for his son-in-law; and besides this, I should perhaps now explain that, though Holme Alders itself—that is to say, the house and grounds, and some amount of the property—would become mine on my father's death, by far the greater part of the estates from which he derived his income, principally in another county, where there was no squire 's house, was entailed on the male line. So in marrying me Arthur would not find himself a rich man, with the cares and responsibilities of a large property to look forward to, which in my father's case had so amply and usefully filled his time.

Yes, there was much to consider, as both fully realised.

'But there is not much use in talking it over and over till we have Meg herself to consult,' said my father, 'and the sooner we can get home the better.'

They were sitting in Arthur's club when this conversation took place, the afternoon of the day of his arrival.

'Can we go down to-morrow?' my father continued.

'I think so,' Arthur replied. 'I must go to the City again in the morning, and after that they will give me a week or so to myself, and—several weeks,

I hope, before I have to give in my decision. Shall we write home to-night or take them by surprise?'

'I am not sure about the advisability of a surprise,' my father was beginning, when the waiter interrupted by ushering in a visitor of the name of Mr Gladwyn.

It was Roland.

Arthur started up in some astonishment, but greeted him kindly enough. They had met once or twice during Arthur's last visit to England, but my father had not seen Roland for many years, and he was painfully struck by the change in his appearance. All the bright charm of manner which had been especially his was gone. He looked prematurely aged, thin, and ill, with an uneasy, almost shifty expression in his eyes, which struck one disagreeably.

'Talking of surprises,' said Arthur after he had shaken hands with his cousin, 'I am astonished to see you already! How in the world did you hear of my coming home?'

'I was naturally anxious,' replied Roland, lifting his eyebrows a little, 'to learn your movements, feeling sure that you would start as soon as possible. I called at once at Leadenhall Street to ask them to communicate with me immediately should they possibly hear of your return before I did. The coincidence of their expecting you was most fortunate. I have awaited this mail with the greatest anxiety, and have now come straight from your office. They told me I should find you here. Have you written

to my private address? Or—perhaps you were too hurried to write from Calcutta?'

Roland burst out with all this so fast that Arthur could not interrupt him till he stopped, half out of breath.

'What on earth are you talking about?' Arthur exclaimed when he got a chance of speaking, for he and his cousin had certainly not been on such terms of close communication as Roland's remarks inferred.

Roland gazed at him.

'You don't mean to say,' he ejaculated—'you don't mean to say that it was your firm's business only that brought you back at this crisis? You—you got my letter and the copy of the will?'

'The *will!*' Arthur repeated, more and more perplexed. 'Whose will?'

'Why, our great-uncle's will—old Uncle Peter's!'

'Is he dead?' said Arthur and my father in a breath.

'Dead! Of course! Nearly three months ago! I wonder you didn't see it in the papers,' he added, turning to my father. 'You never met him, I suppose?' But before my father could reply he hurriedly continued to Arthur: 'You, of course, were the very first person to be communicated with! I had to write to you officially as well as privately, for my employers were his solicitors, as you probably remember?'

Arthur nodded. He did remember that at the time of Roland's great catastrophe old Uncle Peter had obtained for him a berth with the firm alluded to.

'But after all,' Arthur began, 'though I'm sorry to hear of the kind old fellow's death, his will cannot be a matter of great importance to anybody. He had very little to leave. No; I got no letter from you by the last mail before I started—no letter or any communication of any sort, official or otherwise. My return was entirely for business reasons.'

Again Roland stared at him. Then a slight flush rose to his pale cheeks.

'I scarcely know, then, how to tell it all to you,' he began; 'it is so—so extraordinary. But, thank'—here he broke off abruptly—'you are back in time! You are mistaken about Uncle Peter, as was every one. He died a rich man. One might almost call him a miser. His will was proved under fifty thousand pounds.'

Arthur looked up in breathless astonishment.

'And,' continued Roland, 'it is the most extraordinary, eccentric document that even a miser ever conceived. By it he leaves you *everything*, or tantamount to everything. Just a trifle or two to old servants, and a couple of thousand to myself'—Arthur drew a long breath; and Roland, keenly watching him, proceeded—'but on a certain condition; namely, that before you attain the age of thirty you should be

married to a lady of your own rank and of estimable character. I looked up your birthday at once. There is plenty of time—five weeks or more till the first of December.'

'And,' said Arthur, 'should this condition not be complied with?'

'In that case,' said Roland, flushing to a deep purplish tinge, testifying to his miserable state of health—'in that case—but why consider it?—half of his property goes to various charities, twenty thousand to myself, and five thousand to you.'

There was dead silence.

'When was this will executed?' my father asked.

The painful flush, which had faded away from Roland's face, returned.

'Several years ago,' he said; 'in fact, shortly after the date of my unfor'—a scarcely audible sound of disapproval from his companions checked the words—'of my marriage,' he hastily finished.

'And it is indubitably his last will?' asked my father. 'He might have outlived the specified date himself, and seen reason to modify his condition.'

'Exactly what did happen,' said Roland; 'so far, of course, as seeing reason to alter the condition was concerned. He made another will as soon as he was taken ill, leaving unconditionally forty thousand to you, Arthur, and ten thousand to me; but this new will was never signed. When our clerk went with it to him for signature he was already unconscious, though

it had been drawn up with the greatest possible expedition.'

'It is an extraordinary story,' said my father; and seeing that Arthur looked, not unnaturally, somewhat agitated, he got up as he spoke. 'Mr Roland Gladwyn will, I am sure, excuse us if I take you back to my hotel, Arthur,' he went on. 'One way and another, you 've rather too much upon you for consideration just on your arrival. We should do well, I suppose, to see your people to-morrow?' he added to Roland. 'Can you make an appointment for us as early as possible, and let us hear of it by first post?'

'Certainly,' said Roland, with alacrity; and then my father and Arthur bade him good-bye. They walked to the hotel, talking as they went. At first Arthur was almost afraid of what my father must be thinking; it was no little relief to him to hear his first observation, accompanied by a little smile.

'It *is* an extraordinary story,' my father repeated, 'and I suppose, taking everything into consideration—the necessity of your giving your decision to your chiefs before long; the—to me—terrible alternative of Meg's going to India—yes, I suppose there is no choice but to conform with these most eccentric conditions of your old uncle's will.'

'I think so too,' said Arthur, his face brightening. 'Not that I shall want to lead an idle life, as I know you will believe; but'——

'A man with fair private means,' my father inter-

rupted, 'can always find useful employment. No; I am not afraid of that for you. You may turn to politics.'

'And as regards Roland,' Arthur went on, 'I wish, I must say, that the second will had been signed.'

'For *his* sake,' said my father, 'I don't know that I agree with you; though as far as you yourself are concerned, you might perhaps have felt more comfortable. But, remember, your uncle was actually only his second cousin, though Roland called him uncle, and the terms of the unsigned will clearly show that old Peter considered you his heir, and plainly regretted the eccentric condition which he had attached to your inheritance, with doubtless the best motives, however unnecessary.'

This view of the case, which has always seemed to me a sound one, relieved Arthur of any over-conscientious scruples he might have had; and this impression was still further increased by my father's next remark.

'It will be your duty, of course, to look after Roland and his family,' he said. 'How miserably broken-down he looks—much more so than need be. He strikes me as just the sort of man to do something wild with a large sum of money if he got hold of it. There was always a strong touch of recklessness about him.'

By this time they had reached the hotel. As they

entered, the hall-porter, who knew my father well as an old *habitué* of the place, came forward hurriedly.

'Please, sir, there's some one waiting to see you—one of your servants. He's been here some time. It's—it's something very special, I 'm afraid, sir.'

My father had not had time to feel alarmed, scarcely to take in the sense of the words, when the whole shock fell full upon him at once at the sight of our old butler's face.

'O sir!' he began, shaking with nervousness, on the point, I verily believe, of bursting into tears—'O sir—it's Miss Meg!'

My father staggered and caught at Arthur's arm. Horribly afraid though Arthur was himself, he has often told me since that his first sensation was one of inexpressible pity for my poor father, so unutterably full of anguish was his face.

The hall-porter threw open the door of a small private sitting-room close at hand, for there were several people standing about.

'What is it, Bolton?' said my father. 'Is she dead?—that new pony'—— he went on disjointedly.

'No, no, sir,' exclaimed Bolton; 'not so bad as that, please God! There's been no accident, but she's gone! Miss Meg's *gone*, sir!'

'Where? Explain yourself,' said Arthur sharply.

Bolton shook his head.

'That's what we don't know, sir. That's why I came up to find my master. And, thank God, you're

here too. You'll be able to think what to do, sir. I'm an old man, and I'm quite dazed. She was at the Weald yesterday afternoon, and we expected her home for dinner; but she didn't come, and we didn't think much of it, thinking she had stayed the night, as has happened before now. But this morning, when there was no message, and Miss Sweyn expected, we sent over, and found she had left there the afternoon before, to walk home.'

He then went on to relate what measures they had taken on the spot, and what was being done under Mrs Gladwyn's directions, while he himself had come up to London. His two hearers had scarcely patience to listen to him, the irritation was so great of thinking how many hours had been lost, and both felt mad with impatience to be off at once. A suggestion was made as to the advisability of at once employing the police, but as quickly negatived.

'It cannot be a case for them,' said my father. 'She must have fallen, sprained her ankle perhaps, and taken shelter in some cottage, or'—— But no other solution of the mystery was forthcoming, and Bolton shook his head at the very idea of my having spent the night in a cottage without having sent word home.

They left London by the first possible train, reaching home about midnight. A vague hope buoyed them up during the journey that they would find me awaiting them safe and sound; but the sight of the pale faces in the hall at Holme Alders, Auntie Glad and Thea

having come over to poor Morna, soon dispelled this. There was nothing to tell or to hear—nothing but an absolute abyss of mystery.

It would be wearisome and unnecessary to relate the thousand and one fruitless efforts that were made to track me in the course of the next few weeks. Reluctant though he was to do so, dreading the disagreeable publicity that always attaches itself when a matter gets 'into the hands of the police,' my father found himself obliged to have recourse to that worthy body. What their theories were can easily be imagined. I had run away with some unacknowledged adorer; I had suddenly gone off my head, &c., &c.—none of which suggestions, it is needless to say, threw the slightest glimmer of light on the problem.

That first night at Holme Alders, as Arthur has since told me, was the worst of all. I do not believe that one of the five lost consciousness in sleep, and the relief to their terrible tension of anxiety was correspondingly the greater when, to their utter astonishment, the next morning's post-bag brought my first letter—the letter written in the house by the canal—which Phil Blunt had promised me should be forwarded as speedily as possible.

It was an immense relief to their worst fears. Heaven only knows how dark some of these had been! To know that I was not only alive but well, and apparently in no danger, to have these assurances in my own handwriting, was an unutterable comfort; but,

on the other side, my letter only deepened the mystery. They all looked at each other; then poor little Morna burst into tears. She had been wonderfully controlled the day before, and to be met by such tidings on her arrival must have been a very great shock. Mrs Gladwyn and Thea did their best to soothe her; my father and Arthur looked at each other helplessly.

Suddenly Arthur started.

'By-the-bye,' he exclaimed, 'we should have let Roland know, or written to his firm. Perhaps,' he went on, 'the best thing I can do is to go up to London again to—communicate with the police. This letter may be some guide.'

But on consideration this step was not taken just yet, though a note was at once sent to Roland relating the extraordinary disaster, and requesting his co-operation should any action in London be required; for, as my father said, Roland had the reputation of being quick-witted and of having more knowledge of the world, in one sense, than either he or Arthur possessed.

Roland's answer came promptly, and contained many expressions of sympathy and readiness to follow out any suggestions they might send him; and in the end it was to him that the application to Scotland Yard was entrusted.

The following week, as will be remembered, brought my second letter, the first of the two I was allowed to write from the farm. To some extent, of course, it cheered them all; and this they sorely needed, for both

Arthur and my father were already half worn out by the mental strain and the physical fatigue of searching the country in all directions, as they had been doing. Of personal efforts they now seemed to have come to an end. It must, I think, have been about this time that Arthur went up to London again; and my father accompanied him so far, on his way to Morna's home, whither he was escorting her, partly for the sake of a consultation with my uncle Vyner, as the Sweyns were living near my uncle and aunt.

What steps were taken, all that was done in the course of the next three or four weeks, it is useless, as I have already said, to dwell upon; and then another element was added to the complications by the receipt of a letter from old Mr Gladwyn's solicitors, reminding Arthur of the eccentric terms of his great-uncle's will, and of how short a time remained in which to fulfil them. Considerably to Arthur's surprise, they made no allusion to my disappearance.

'They may not have known of your engagement,' said my father when Arthur handed him the letter and expressed his astonishment. 'But it is most extraordinary that your cousin has not told them about it and our present terrible circumstances.'

The next post, however, brought a letter from Roland's wife, telling of his very serious illness. He had been ailing for some time, she wrote, but the last fortnight had brought things to a crisis. He was now unable to leave his room.

'I suppose he wanted it kept quiet at first,' said my father, 'though when it came to his seeing the police for us I wonder he did not tell his firm.'

That night the four—for Mrs Gladwyn and Thea were still at Holme Alders—held a last and almost despairing consultation as to what further steps could be taken, and it was during this conversation, incredible as it may appear, that for the *first* time the strange coincidence of my disappearance at a moment when the whole of Arthur's future was depending upon my presence struck my friends.

The plot was thickening indeed, for, as poor Thea, whose imagination had worked more rapidly than the others', glanced at Arthur and my father with a half-terrified inquiry, the door opened and old Bolton entered the room, with a look of suppressed excitement.

'If you please, sir,' he began, 'there 's a—a strange-looking man—a sort of a tramp, all muffled-up-like—asking to see you. I 've left him outside. What had I best do?'

My father started to his feet; so did Arthur. Of course, one thought was in both their minds.

'Leave him where he is,' said my father. 'We will both come;' and they made their way to the door, just outside which the stranger was standing.

Arthur went first. As he looked out, the man came forward and whispered to him. Arthur turned to my father.

'Send Bolton away,' he said; 'it is all right.'

My father did so; and, unperceived by any one else, they brought the stranger into the small study close at hand. A lamp was burning there, but it did not need its light to satisfy Arthur as to their visitor's identity. It was Phil Blunt, though terribly changed. The poor fellow looked round him nervously.

'Would you mind locking the door, sir?' he began. 'I 've—I 've lost my pluck somehow. I thought I 'd never get here;' and he seemed on the point of fainting.

They made him sit down, and gave him some simple restorative; and then he told his story. It is unnecessary to recapitulate what I have already told, but I must shortly explain how Phil had come to make one, in appearance at least, of the gang who had been bribed to carry me off—by whom, or why, Phil was in ignorance. All he could tell was, that the leader of the party was no other than his cousin Jeremy, whom I, never having seen, had therefore not recognised in the small, insignificant man who had inspired me with such special aversion. Poor Phil's unlucky star had certainly been in the ascendant just then. For years past, thanks to Arthur, he had been abroad and doing well, when, on his first visit home, he had fallen in with the evil genius of his life, and accidentally found out something of the plot the fellow was then engaged in. On his threatening

to disclose it, Jeremy met him by counter-threats. The wrong-doings of his early youth, the illegal proceedings in which he had been mixed up, of which he had always morbidly exaggerated the consequences, were again held over him; but all this he would have set at defiance had it been possible for him to convey warning to us in time to stop the execution of the scheme. This was impossible, even if he could have made his escape from Jeremy and his subordinates—and he was only one against several—he would have been too late.

Then a sudden idea came to him. He affected to give in to a certain extent—not for the sake of joining in the reward; such a motive on Phil's part Jeremy, mean as he was, would not have believed in. But he well knew Phil's dread of any revelation of the past, and, counting on this, he agreed to Phil's terms. Under disguise he was to make one of the party, to be allowed specially to guard me as much as possible from all fright or roughness, and to accompany me to my destination, on condition of his not revealing my whereabouts till a certain time should have elapsed.

'And did you mean to keep to that?' Arthur inquired at this point.

'I scarcely know,' was the reply. 'I gave my word, but I was so confused and hurried that I don't think I took it quite in. And I had my doubts of them all along. I was always on the look-out for foul play.

And it came—they never meant me to go more than a bit of the way, nor to lose sight of me.'

Then he described the scuffle on the railway platform, from which, for the moment, he had got off intact, making his way out of the station after wrenching himself from the grasp of his detainer. But, alas! the cart was still waiting outside.

'If only,' said Phil, 'I had had the sense to jump into it, I might have made off for good.'

In a few moments he was overtaken on the road. Hampered by his woman's garments, he was unable to cope with the ruffianly landlord of the inn, who knocked him down, hit him on the head with the butt-end of his whip—to which a scar across his forehead bore testimony—and Phil knew no more.

When he recovered consciousness he found himself in the ward of a hospital in a small town of which he had never heard before, and where he was informed that he was recovering from inflammation of the brain, brought on by a bad accident.

He held his tongue; indeed, for some time he was too weak to ask any questions, and unconscious how long it had been since he was brought there; and when at last discharged as convalescent, his first and one idea was to make his way to Holme Alders at once, which had not been accomplished without immense difficulty, penniless as he was, save for a few shillings which the hospital authorities had given him out of sheer pity for his utter destitution. When he

had got so far in his narration he seemed well-nigh exhausted, but utterly refused to think of rest or sleep till he had told *all* that could throw light as to my probable destination. This was but little, though not without importance, as through his illness he had remembered the name of the station where he had been forced to part with me. Any explanation as to the motive of my abduction he was totally unable to supply.

The very next morning furnished another link, or the prospect of one at least, in the chain now developing; for it brought the letter on which my last, though best, hopes of rescue had been founded.

It was Thea who first caught at the indication it contained.

'This means something!' she exclaimed at once, putting her finger on the message to Morna Sweyn. 'She must be communicated with instantly.'

Neither my father nor Arthur was the sort of man to think lightly of a woman's intuition, and that same morning, after another talk with Phil, and after making arrangements for his complete security, saw them start again on the long journey to Morna's home.

The hopes which had buoyed them up since Thea's suggestion were not disappointed.

'I know—I know what she means,' cried Morna as soon as she had read the passage. 'You remember, Mr Langholme, the summer we were at Kammersbay,

and the excursions we made with Mahlah Lennox?' and she rapidly related what had passed in the little wood near Lobb's Rocks and the waterfall. 'It is there—near there that we shall find her.'

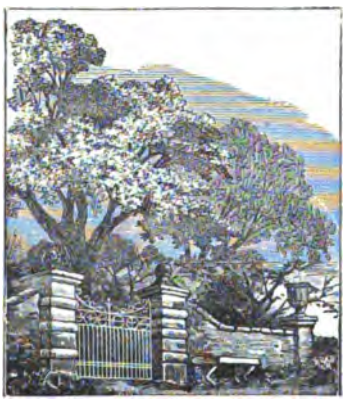
And it all tallied; the name of the station furnished by Phil, being one of those on a line passing through the part of the country indicated, was easily identified.

Some preliminary measures, however, had to be taken before the actual quest could begin. It was not till two days later that my father and Arthur, accompanied by a couple of detectives, and with a certain all-important document procured in London, arrived at the little inn at Kammersbay, where, to their great satisfaction, they found the Lennox family still living, and secured their hearty interest and Mahlah's co-operation.

How cleverly and successfully the young woman brought her native wit to bear in my service is already known.

She spent a day or two in visiting the outlying farmhouses within a certain radius of the wood, while the detectives worked from the other side. For Lobb's Rocks and the places near them lay, as it were, in the hilly, isolated tract of country between the two recently constructed railway-lines — the one which came to a terminus at Kammersbay, the other running northwards, and by which I had been brought to the station nearest to the Saunders's farm.

That homestead was all but decided upon by the detectives as the probable scene of my captivity, when the lucky coincidence of my crossing the yard during her colloquy with the farmer's wife gave Mahlah the honour of bringing the matter to a certainty.



CHAPTER XIX.

'THE DAY AFTER TO-MORROW.'

AND now again I will take up the thread of my personal narrative.

I stood there in the lane with Arthur's arms protecting me, scarcely able to believe that it was not a beautiful dream. Mrs Saunders helped to give it reality. She rushed forward in the greatest terror.

'Miss, miss,' she cried, 'what are you doing? Who is this? Remember your promise. Harry 'll never forgive me if you run away—just what they 've been saving you from!'

'What nonsense have you been told?' I replied indignantly. 'Arthur, what do you want me to do?'

He glanced at Mrs Saunders, by this time dissolved in tears, the sight of which made me regret my harshness.

'She has been good and kind to me,' I hastened to say. 'I don't want to get her into trouble. She

and her husband have only been made tools of—perhaps we had better go home with her—it is true I did promise—I'll tell you all afterwards! Oh Arthur, what I have gone through!' and I had now hard work to keep back my own tears.

'It is all over now, my darling. But'—and his face changed darkly—'when I come across the perpetrators of this infernal plot'—— He stopped. 'Yes,' he went on, 'we will go back to the farm, for there your father and others are waiting for us;' and as we walked on, followed by the trembling Mrs Saunders, he explained to me a little of what I have already related, adding that my father and his supporters had made their way to the Saunders's house from the other side, but that a curious instinct that he would find me myself somewhere nearer the marked tree had led him to come up the steep ascent from Kammersbay, guided some part of the way by Mahlah.

Of the scene at the farm—where, as Arthur had expected, we were met by my dearest father and the detectives he had brought with him—it is needless to say much. Indeed, I must confess that I retain but a very indistinct impression of it. I remember feeling it almost as difficult to restrain my laughter as it had been to keep back my tears when I caught sight of the poor farmer's face of honest terror when he had listened to the few words of explanation my father gave him at my request, for I really pitied both

him and his wife, and felt grateful to them. In a sense, too, I could now afford to pity the unfortunate cripple as he sat in sullen silence, refusing to answer a single question. And afterwards I came to pity him still more, when I found that the one for whose sake he had undertaken what he may have believed to be a legitimate service, the benefactor of his life, whom he looked upon as a hero of goodness, stood revealed to him as little if any better than a common scoundrel.

And here perhaps it may be as well to say that the precise nature of the story by which the Saunders family had been hoodwinked into receiving me as a prisoner was never fully made known to us. The simple folk had been told by one whose statement they accepted as infallible, that by thus acting they would be rescuing an innocent girl from some terrible peril, of which she herself was ignorant.

A carriage was in waiting to take us back to Kammersbay. It was a long drive, as of course we had to take the circuitous route. Under other circumstances I might have found it wearisome. But if we had driven all day and all night I should have thought myself in paradise. And the delight was great of finding myself again at the dear old inn, where Mrs Lennox and Mahlah were looking out for us with the greatest anxiety.

Nor were the emotions of that eventful day yet over for me.

As soon as I had had some food and rested a little, my father and Arthur related to me the extraordinary position in which the latter—nay, I myself also, were placed by old Uncle Peter's eccentric will. All was broken to me with the greatest tenderness and consideration, but by no girl could such an announcement as that contained in the words with which my father concluded the strange story have been received without agitation.

'So you see, Meg, my darling, it all rests with you. Thank God, it now does so! This is the 29th of November, and Arthur will be thirty *the day after to-morrow*.'

I looked up with startled eyes.

'Do you mean'—— I began, but Arthur broke in impetuously.

'Nothing, Meg, but what you feel you can fully consent to. I could sacrifice anything rather than have you distressed. But if you can'—— Here my father came to his assistance.

'Meg is no child, Arthur,' he said quietly, 'but a woman, wise beyond her years, brave and reasonable. We are all ready, my darling,' he went on; 'we have brought a special licence with us, and you may be married here, in the little old church you remember so well, thus assuring your own and Arthur's future happiness—and mine.' Here his voice broke a little. 'I could less than ever face your going out to India, after all these weeks of misery.'

And looking at him again, I saw more clearly than before how terribly he had suffered. He had aged perceptibly since I had seen him last.

So, for his sake too, I could not stand out. I had no reason to do so, for I trusted Arthur as but few brides, it is to be feared, can trust. He was a part of my very life.

So the next morning we were married, I in the selfsame dress, now grown shabby with much wear, which I had put on so cheerfully that last morning at home, defiant of the warning the night had brought me. And the same day we all went back to that dear home, for I felt as if there only could I be in perfect peace and security, or find the rest and renewed strength I sorely needed.

It did not come all at once, however—the strength, that is to say; for, as was, I suppose, almost to be expected, I fell ill—not dangerously, but seriously—an illness, too, so much affecting my nervous system that, but for the devotion and tenderness with which I was nursed, might have left its marks upon me through life, in the shape of weakened health, mental as well as physical.

But surely no one ever had such nursing, for both Mrs Gladwyn and Thea stayed on with us at Holme Alders till I was all but well again.

These weeks must have been trying for Arthur, who was constantly on the road backwards and forwards to and from London, where his presence, and that of

my father too, more than once, was needed for many reasons. My husband had his own business matters with Uncle Peter's lawyers to attend to, all of which was concluded satisfactorily; and he still, of course, felt himself responsible to his employers for the completion of the mission which so fortunately had brought him home just in the nick of time. All this he saw to conscientiously, earning many expressions of regret at his retirement from his post; and, lastly, the machinery which had been set at work most rigorously to track down Jeremy Blunt and his accomplices, or, more correctly speaking, the mysterious originator of the plot, necessitated constant application to my father, Arthur, and Phil, who was still under our roof, slowly regaining health. But all that was being done in this direction—not a little, doubtless, to the disgust of the police, who had succeeded in tracing Jeremy to a part where he was supposed to have sailed for the Colonies—was suddenly brought to a standstill by a summons for Arthur to his cousin Roland's bedside. This came in the form of a letter from his wife, not many days after our return.

'My husband is dying,' she wrote; and Arthur went at once.

All latent suspicion on his part and my father's was changed into startling certainty by what passed at that strange interview.

'You have come to hear the confession of a dying man, who scarcely dares hope for your forgiveness,'

were the words which greeted my husband as he entered the sickroom; and this was the story Roland told, related to me afterwards on my recovery.

'I did it all,' he began. 'But I had not planned it beforehand. It was the sudden temptation that overcame me. The Evil One himself must have been in it. I knew of Uncle Peter's illness; I knew of the new will for which he gave instructions almost at the last —the unsigned will—and I was glad of what was to come to me. But when he died and I found that the former one must be acted upon, I think I went mad. My affairs are in a desperate state; they have gone from bad to worse. The two thousand pounds will only tide me over for a few weeks. A copy of the will was confided to me to send to you at once, and I wrote with it, of course. Then, when I had closed and sealed it, came the thought, "Could I delay your return till too late?"—for I had not the least doubt that on receiving it you would manage to start at once. That was my first sin. I kept the letter back—back for one mail only, for before the next went out I had learnt by inquiry at your office of your expected return. Then all hope failed me. It was at this juncture, just after despatching the delayed document that—the Evil One *must* have had a hand in it—I fell in again with that fellow, Jeremy Blunt. I had come across him before. He is a clever scoundrel, and his grudge against the Langholmes had never been satisfied. I needn't go into too many details, beyond

telling you that he knew my desperate position. Bit by bit the scheme had been taking shape in my mind of working from the other side, of carrying off your bride, as I could not delay *you*. And here was my tool ready to hand. Furthermore, as fate would have it, at that very time my wife got a letter from some of her relatives, good worthy people—the father and mother at least—to whom I had been of great service in rescuing their son from a gang of sharpers who had got hold of him. He would have been transported but for me. They don't know my name; none of my wife's people do—they call her Mrs Glegg. Mrs Saunders wrote to ask us not to forget her should we come across any one in want of plain but comfortable country quarters. Here was the cage I needed, all prepared. No harm would come to Meg under their care; I was not so brutal as to have risked anything of that kind for her whom I had loved and played with as a child. So I wrote a long, plausible story—a tissue of lies, of course—to the son Harry, whom I knew I could rely on to the last, demanding this service at their hands. Jeremy did the rest. It was a wild scheme—a perfectly mad scheme. Sooner or later it must have been traced to me, but I did not care. All I thought of was to get hold of the money, to clear myself on this side, and start for a fresh country with capital enough to begin a new career. It would be the salvation of my children, I said to myself, and, after all, it would do you no real harm, beyond the loss

of the money, which you would not need so sorely as I. So I carried it out. You know the details. I never realised the misery I would cause you all. I would not face it, saying to myself it was but temporary. That is all I have to tell.'

For a moment or two Arthur kept silence. He could not trust himself to speak. Then he said slowly: 'You risked Meg's life, or—her sanity.'

Roland groaned.

'I know you can never forgive me,' he said, 'but —she will get better. I feel she will;' and Arthur, looking at him again, thought to himself that the miserable man's own days were surely numbered.

'I will try to forgive you,' he said as he left him; and the practical result of this good resolution was not delayed: all proceedings against the originator and perpetrator of the plot were at once stopped, and for ever.

And here I will tell you all that remains to be told about our unfortunate cousin. He did *not* die, not till some years later. He recovered sufficiently to see himself cleared from his desperate position and placed on his feet again in a new country, where he did well, for he was undoubtedly clever, and his deep gratitude to Arthur furnished him with a new incentive to steady endeavour.

And to finish here with the 'villains' of my story; contrary to all 'poetical' or other justice, Jeremy Blunt escaped scot-free, though minus the reward he had

worked for, either in money or in gratified revenge for his imaginary wrongs. Phil never left England again—never left Holme Alders, where he is still, an elderly man now, our trusted and trustworthy bailiff.

To return to ourselves. As soon as I was able to travel Arthur took me abroad for our strangely delayed honeymoon; and on our return, after a happy three months of wandering, Morna came to us for the long visit I had been looking forward to with such eagerness.

Looking back as I write, over the whole of my narrative, two or three details occur to me which may be of interest.

I was sitting one day, in the spring of the year following our marriage, toying with old Uncle Peter's little seal, which Arthur had just restored to my own watch-chain, reminding me as he did so that I had only lent it to him.

'It was a prophetic loan,' I said; 'you did come to me on wings when I most needed you! Why, you must have been close to England the very day I was carried off! By-the-bye,' I went on, as a sudden new idea struck me, 'you should have been in India according to a strange dream I had;' and I related it to him.

He started with surprise.

'It is more curious than if I *had* been in India,' he said; 'for that very night, my last at sea, I dreamt

of you, Meg, as I had never dreamt of you before. It seemed to me that you were in great distress or peril. I thought I heard you calling me, and, strange to say, I fancied I saw you coming home, across the garden of the house I had lived in latterly, a house with large and beautiful grounds, where I was staying with friends.'

And when he described the place in detail, it tallied precisely with the scene of my vision.

'There is another thing I always wanted to ask you about,' I went on. 'Was irritation at Roland's miserable marriage the only motive for Uncle Peter's extraordinary will?'

'Oh no,' my husband replied, with some surprise. 'I fancied you knew something of his own history. His life was saddened and stunted by a delayed marriage; over-prudence and over-caution were at the bottom of it, and the girl was delicate: she died, and he always fancied that he might have saved her. From that time he became the peculiar man he was to the end—more peculiar, indeed, than we suspected, for he must have been almost a miser, though full of kind, unselfish care for others. He wanted to save me from his own mistake on the one side, and from Roland's on the other. No doubt when he made the will he thought he would die long before I was thirty. Then again, when his health improved, he grew over-confident and put off changing it too long.'

One thing more, you, my children, and grandchildren

too, as they grow up—for whom I have retraced the story of my early days—may care to know.

Did old 'Tilda's forecast of the future prove correct in all details? Did I hear the nightly rider once again, and but once? Yes. There came a night on which the fateful thud of his horse's feet caught my ears, alas! too unmistakably. It did not awake me, for I was watching by the bedside of my dearest father, and I knew what it meant. He rode right up to our hall-door this time. Arthur heard it too, and as the sound slowly died away again in the distance, the faint, faint hopes we had still been cherishing died too. But it was all calm and peaceful. We 'bowed our heads,' as 'Tilda had prophesied, in resignation and deep thankfulness that we had been able to make the last years of the last Langholme of Holme Alders happy ones.

And the night rider has never come again; and I feel sure he never will. He has vanished with the old name.

THE END.

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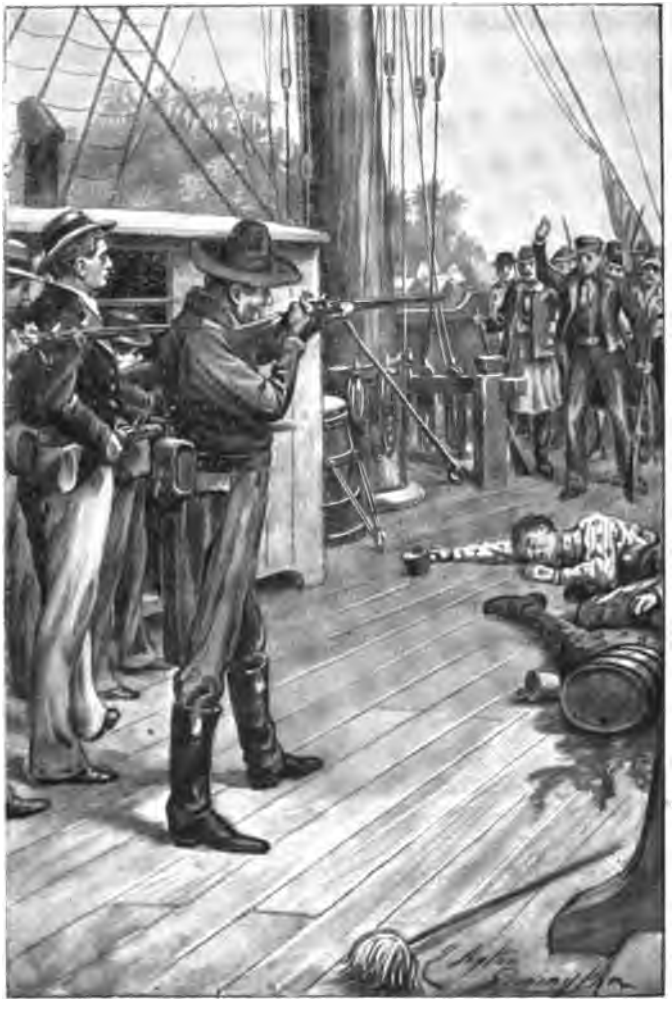

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